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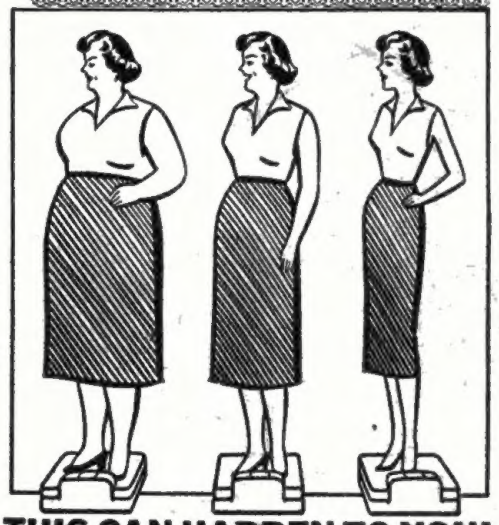

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TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

VOL. 2, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION 1955 EDITION

A Complete Novel

NO GUNS FOR HIRE ..... **George Michener** **10**
Nobody knew just where Harry Severn stood in this onrushing range feud, yet because he was a fighter to the core, they cared—everybody cared

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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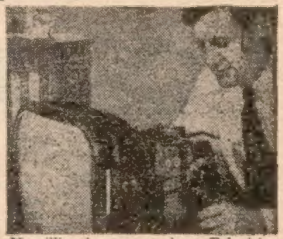

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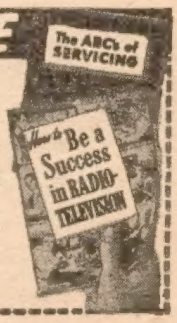

The note said Durk Pastor would die this night. . . .

One Night at Sadie Hogan's

By RAY GAULDEN

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DURK PASTOR sat alone at a card table in Sadie Hogan's Big Corral and tried not to look at the batwings, tried not to let the crowd know that he was the least bit worried. But he couldn't help being a little worked up. There was sweat on his forehead and the palms of his hands, and he wished somebody would open a window. It was like an oven in this place.

He glanced down at the little piece of paper he had stuck in his shirt pocket. He didn't need to read it again to know what it said. An hour ago, old Limpy Smith, who owned the livery stable here in town, had come rushing into the barroom and handed Durk the piece of brown wrapping paper which, Limpy said, someone had left pinned to the door of his little cubby-hole office while he was out to supper.

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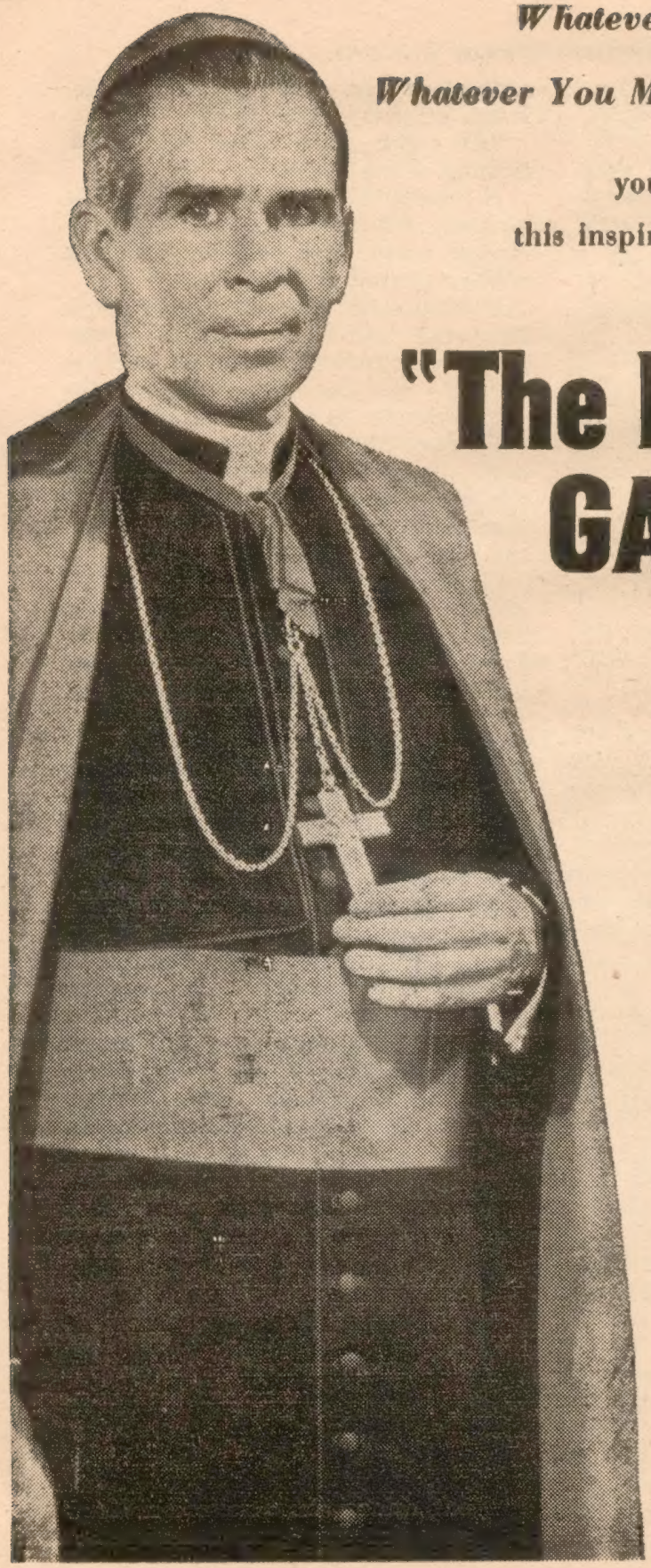

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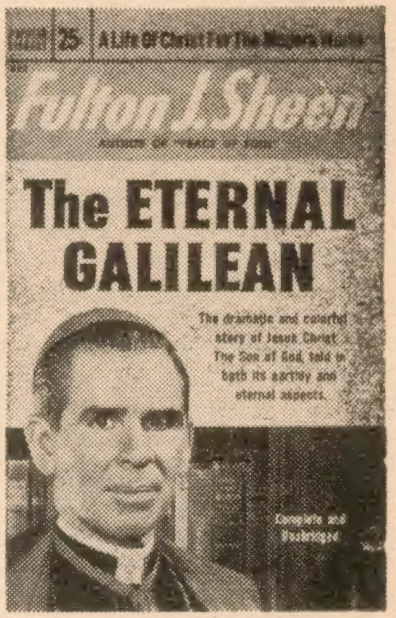

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The note was addressed to Durk Pastor and it read:

> I guess you didn't know that John Banks had a kid. But he did. For a long time, I've been looking for you, Durk Pastor, and tonight I'll watch you die. Tommy Banks

Durk Pastor had read the note and laughed, even though he didn't really feel like it. He had said that if anybody was looking for him, he would be waiting. Of course, old Limpy Smith had read the note and he hadn't been able to keep his big mouth closed. Now everybody knew about it, and they were all waiting to see what would happen.

Some of them had slapped Durk on the back and said if he needed help, they would be there to lend a hand. But he knew they didn't mean what they said. The people of this town hated him and would like nothing better than to see him out of the way. They just talked nice to him because they were afraid he would come out on top like he had always done.

Durk jumped a little when Sadie Hogan, the mountainous woman who owned the Big Corral, came padding up behind him.

Durk scowled.

"Oh, it's you," he said ungraciously.

Sadie's fleshy face wore a worried look. "You're not getting nervous, are you, Durk?" she asked. "You're not worried about this Tommy Banks gent?"

Durk laughed. "Me, worried? You ought to know better than that."

SADIE did not look too relieved. "I don't know what this Tommy Banks has got against you, Durk, and I don't care," she said. "You're my friend and if you say the word, I'll have a couple of my boys watch the door."

Durk Pastor's lips flattened and his eyes flashed at her. "I don't need any of your help. Quit sticking your nose in my business."

"Sure, Durk. Don't get mad at me. I was only trying to help."

"All right, so you were only trying to help. Let's forget it."

A man at the bar called to the fat woman, and Durk was glad when she moved away. Confound it, she was always getting in his hair.

Durk poured himself another drink from the half-empty bottle on the table, then turned his eyes toward the bar. He saw Bart Steele looking his way. Steele had his back to the cherrywood bar, one boot heel hooked over the brass rail and a glass of whisky in his hand. There was, Durk thought, something like mockery in the big man's eyes.

Durk Pastor cursed under his breath. Some day he and Steele would lock horns, but now was not the time. Steele was disliked on this range as much as Durk Pastor. He was a bad man to fool with and he was fast with a gun. Durk knew that a lot of folks were wondering which one of them would come out on top in a shoot-out. One of these days they would have a chance to find out. It couldn't go on much longer.

Bart Steele owned the big 77 Ranch at the lower end of the valley. He had been well on his way to gobbling up the entire range till Durk Pastor had come along.

Ten years ago Durk had robbed and killed old John Banks, the express agent, down in Ranger, Texas. Durk had got away clean, certain that no one had seen him. He had come north to this town of Deertrail and bought the big Horseshoe Ranch at the upper end of the valley. He had looked out over the rich green land and told himself that some day he would own the whole shebang.

He had done all right for himself. He had hired some tough riders and showed a lot of folks that he meant business. Steele was the one man he couldn't handle. They had a certain respect for each other, but they weren't kidding themselves. They

(Continued on page 128)

"I ESCAPED DEATH BY FIRE"...

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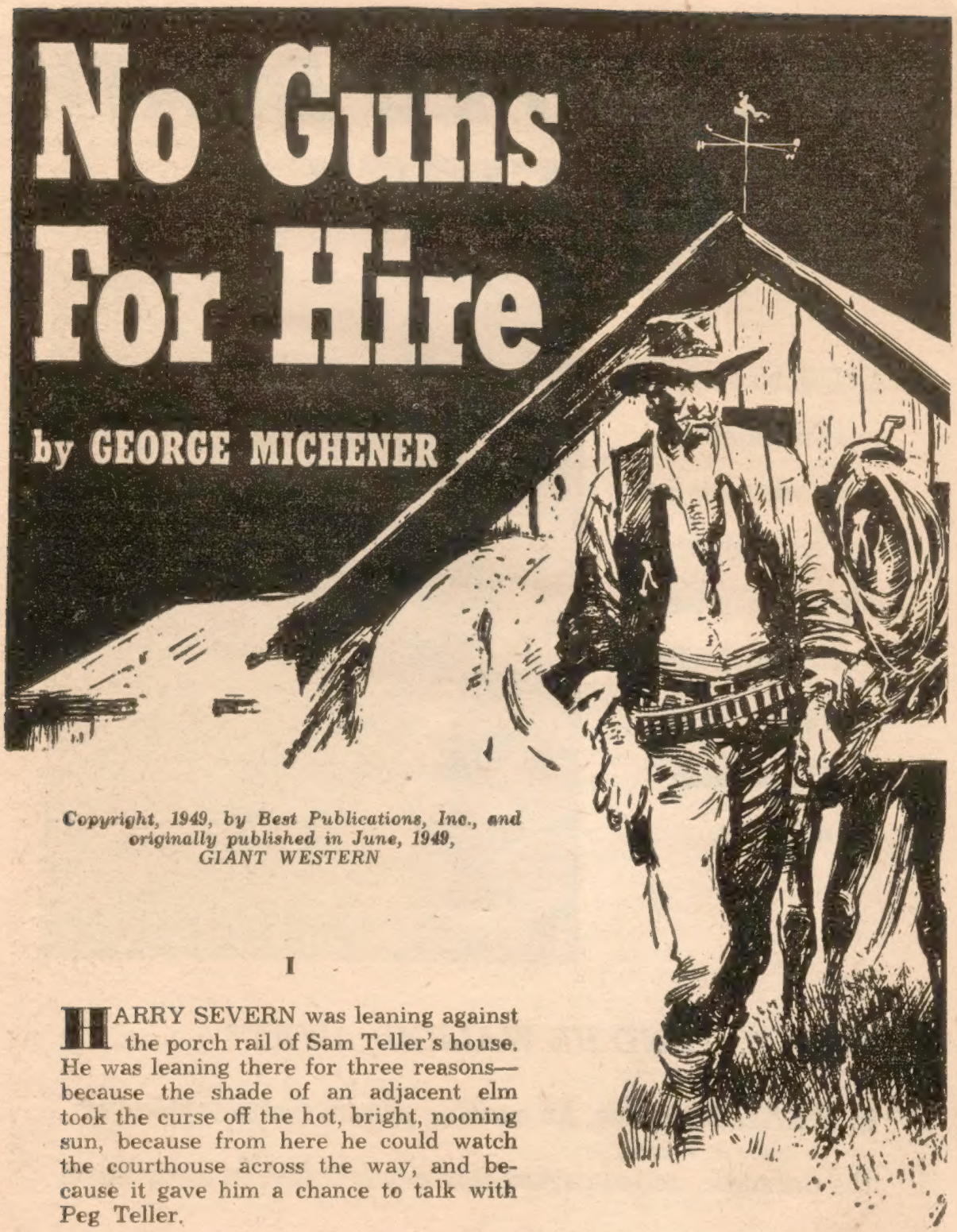
by GEORGE MICHENER



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I

HARRY SEVERN was leaning against the porch rail of Sam Teller's house. He was leaning there for three reasons—because the shade of an adjacent elm took the curse off the hot, bright, nooning sun, because from here he could watch the courthouse across the way, and because it gave him a chance to talk with Peg Teller.

Nobody knew just where Harry Severn stood in this range feud, yet because he was a fighter, they cared—everybody cared

Peg was standing on the porch behind Harry Severn, a dust cloth around her head and a broom in her hands. She, too, was gazing toward the courthouse. A buggy and several buckboards were halted in the street and there was a scattering of saddlers. Three men, small farmers from Horse Flats to the north, were grouped by the open door of the courthouse and peering inside. The men seemed angry.

Peg came closer to the porch rail. She spoke over Harry Severn's shoulder.

"I guess Martin's on the stand now," she said.

Severn nodded. "Probably."

"What do you think, Harry? Will he stick to his story?"

Severn, gloomy and silent, shook his head. He was a chunkily built young man with powerful wrists and hands, and dark, tough features. He was also—as he freely would have admitted—tough-minded. There was no nonsense about Harry Severn. You looked out for Number One first, for if you didn't, you were likely to wind up behind the eight ball. That was Harry Severn's philosophy, driven into him by a foster father's bull whip and learned anew on dim, borderland trails. There was a deputy sheriff's badge on his coat.

Sam Teller came out of the house and paused on the porch. He was a small, neat man in his early fifties. A diamond stud gleamed on his white shirt front. His eyes were blue and hard. He nodded to his daughter and Severn.

"They won't convict him," he said.

"But Martin saw the whole thing," Peg said protestingly. "Martin says Monahan never had a chance. Jean Targen just pulled his gun and shot him down."

"They won't convict him," repeated Sam Teller.

"Maybe," said Harry Severn, "I made a mistake. When I brought Jean Targen in, some of the Home Flats boys stopped us. They wanted to string Jean up. Maybe I should have let' em."

"No," said Teller, "you did right. You brought Jean in—that was your job. And—" he smiled faintly—"Cole Devoe will get him off. That's his job."

"But Martin—" began Peg.

"Martin," said Teller, "will switch his story. Martin has a wife and kids to take care of. That's his job." He went down the steps and looked back at Severn. "It's a hard world, Harry."

SEVERN made no reply. He watcher Sam Teller cross the dusty street and enter the Blue Bull Saloon. Teller owned the Blue Bull.

Peg made mechanical sweeping motions with her broom. She was small, like her father, and had high cheekbones and full, half-smiling lips. Her eyes were large and darkly expressive. Sam Teller claimed that Peg's mother, who had died when Peg was born, had been a very beautiful woman. Severn could believe that.

He spoke suddenly. "How old are you, Peg?"

"Twenty-two." The girl looked up. "You know, Harry, that's the first personal question I ever remember you asking me."

"Well—" Severn frowned, then said evasively, "I didn't think you were that old."

"I am, though. I've been around."

Severn nodded. He guessed Peg had seen a good many places. Sam was a professional gambler and he had played all the boom towns, dragging Peg along with him. Sam had landed here in Brinker City at about the same time Harry Severn had—three years ago. Sam had bought the Blue Bull Saloon and sworn to Peg that he was settling down for good. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. Sam Teller was a restless person.

"Did Cole Devoe come in town today?" asked Peg.

"Yes. But he's not at the trial."

"Bob came in, too?"

"I guess so. If he did, he'll show up here pretty quick." Severn grinned slightly. "Bob Devoe's a nice feller. He'll come into a barrel of money when old Cole dies."

Peg leaned on her broom. She stared defiantly. "Anything wrong with money?" she demanded.

"Nope. Wish I had a bucketful."

"Sam's right," said Peg. "It's a hard world. You're a fool if you don't take what comes your way."

"That's right," said the deputy.

His ready agreement seemed to anger the girl. She flushed.

"Alice Devoe," she remarked cuttingly, "is a nice feller, too, isn't she, Harry?"

The deputy was silent. Uneasily he rubbed his chin.

Peg leaned closer. Her dark eyes softened as she said quietly:

"We aren't fools, are we?"

"No-o. I guess not, Peg."

"We understand each other, don't we, pardner?"

"I guess we do, Peg."

"Do we?" Peg gave a brittle laugh. She turned abruptly and ran into the house. She slammed the door.

For a moment Severn frowned after her. Then his attention went back to the courthouse. Something was happening across the way. The three men by the courthouse entrance surged forward, then halted as they were joined by two more from inside the building. The five—all Horse Flats men—stood there in an angry group. One of the men yelled at someone in the courtroom and shook his fist.

Sheriff Mark Trimble, spare, angular and graying, hustled out of the courtroom. He pushed through the knot of Horse Flats men with a swimming motion of his long arms and hurried across the street toward Severn. The deputy straightened.

The sheriff strode up to Severn.

THE BEST OF THE WEST

WHY is it that stories about the Old West outnumber by tens of thousands the tales written about any other place or period in all the history of the world? Why are they favorites even in foreign countries whose own pasts were filled with lance-toting knights and cutlass-swinging buccaneers?

There is no one answer, of course. We would say the Western story's popularity is due to a combination of things, including the challenge of a vast new land in a world whose garden spots had been thickly populated for generations. Here was adventure and danger in a country of mighty mountains and rivers and prairies without end. Here was splendor in waterfalls and waterless wastes and rainbow-hued canyons, a threat of death from Indian arrows and grizzly bears that could break a man in two with the swing of a paw.

But again, and who knows just why, the most popular period of the West is not the early mountain-man period but the later one of the cowboy, the man on a horse so often called on to perform superhuman feats with a sixgun and a forty-foot length of rope. And out of the thousands of Westerns we have published, it is mostly stories of this favorite type we have selected for this year's annual. We hope you enjoy them—the Best of the West—as much as we did.

—The Editor

"Get your horse," he said in a low voice. The sheriff's brown eyes were worried.

The deputy settled his coat. "Martin?" he asked briefly.

The sheriff nodded. "That's it. He just got off the stand. He switched his story—says now that Monahan went for his gun first."

"So Cole Devoe did get to Martin, did he?"

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. "Get your horse," he repeated.

"I've already got it. Over there. Right by Martin's."

Good. I'll go in and get him. If we can get him out of town before the trial's over, we can make it without any trouble."

"Want me to go in with you?"

"No!" said the sheriff sharply. "You ain't so popular with the Horse Flats men, either. You just lay low. I'll get him out to his horse. All I want you to do is ride along with him out of town. Maybe you'd better go all the way home with him."

"All right."

THE sheriff hesitated. He gazed doubtfully at his deputy.

"No trouble now," he warned. "If Horse Flats fellers try to start something with Martin, you just ease him home easy."

"All right," said the deputy again.

The sheriff shook his head in worried fashion and hastened back to the courthouse. Severn followed at a leisurely pace. He took his station by his and Martin's horses and waited

Through the open window of the courtroom he heard a clipped, rapidly speaking voice. The prosecution was making its summation to the jury. It wouldn't be long now, the deputy guessed. Martin's testimony would have collapsed the whole case against Devoe's gunman, Jean Targen. The judge would charge the jury, and the jury would file out.

The verdict was now a foregone conclusion. Jean Targen would go free—free to try his expert hand at another little killing.

Harry Severn looked down at his law badge and scowled.

The majesty of the law! he thought sourly. Which was strictly a laugh. What his badge actually symbolized, as he well knew, was the majesty of Cole Devoe and his barrelful of money.

The deputy jerked up his head. Sheriff Trimble was escorting the witness, Martin, from the courthouse. Martin, an insignificant little rabbit of a man, was crowding close to the sheriff as the two rushed through the group of Horse Flats men on the stoop. Someone stuck out a foot and Martin tripped. The sheriff caught the little man by the arm and whisked him down the steps. The Horse Flats men started to follow.

The sheriff gave Martin a thrust toward his horse, then whirled to face the men behind him. Placatingly he held up a hand.

"Now, now!" he cried. "Careful, boys. Watch it, boys!" His voice sounded thin in that sunlit street.

Martin came on at a run. Severn could see more men boiling out from the courthouse—angry men, shouting after Martin. A woman, sunbonnet dangling on loose ribbons, popped out. She was yelling and pointing her finger at Martin. Her face was viciously contorted.

Sheriff Trimble remained solidly planted on the walk. His two long arms sawed the air. "Now, now!" he pleaded again. "Easy, boys!"

Martin reached his horse, grabbed the reins from Severn and scrambled into saddle. For a moment Severn held to Martin's horse. "All right," he said soothingly. "No hurry. Just keep your horse walking."

Martin stared dully down at him without answering. The deputy stepped back, and Martin swung his horse away from the hitchrack. The deputy climbed into his own saddle.

A thick-set, black-bearded man

strode out into the street beside Sheriff Trimble and stood motionless.

"Martin!" he called sharply, and there was an intonation in that single word that carried threat and shriveling contempt. Severn turned his horse and followed Martin.

"Martin!" called the black-bearded man again.

Severn saw Martin's thin shoulders quiver as if at the impact of a blow. The little man did not look back.

"Severn!" called the black-bearded man.

The deputy drew alongside Martin. "Not so fast," he said easily. "Just a steady walk. We're not running."

The two horses moved sedately along the sun-hot street.

II

BEYOND the town limits, Severn glanced back. The walk where the sheriff had taken his stand now was empty. Most of the Horse Flats men, so Severn judged, had straggled back into the courtroom to wait the conclusion of the trial. A few, however, remained in the street, were getting their saddlers from the tie-racks.

To one side was the long figure of Sheriff Trimble. He was flourishing his arms, expostulating, apparently, to the solidly planted black-bearded man.

The deputy had a feeling of uneasiness. It looked to him as if those few Horse Flats men were preparing to come after Martin. He kneed his horse. "All right," he said to Martin. "We can go a little faster now."

They left the small town of Brinker City glinting heat shimmering in the trough below them. They followed the Horse Flats trail, Severn and little Martin, through the bench grasslands toward Squaw Gorge. As the trail climbed, the pasture thinned and browned. Rock heaps appeared. An occasional bullpine made its solitary showing. The two riders halted. Martin rolled a cigarette. He stared at the deputy and spoke for the first time.

"Them crooked lawyers!" he said.

The deputy was inscrutably silent.

There was a sort of wild defiance in Martin's eyes. "They twist a man around!" he cried. "A man don't know what he's saying!"

The deputy considered him remotely. He knew it was no lawyer who had twisted Martin around—it was fear. That, and maybe a few thin droppings from Cole Devoe's barrelful of money. Now a new fear was taking hold of Martin—fear of his neighbors, the Horse Flats men whose cause he had betrayed. Martin was the lonely little man, one of the many little men of this world fated to walk always in fear.

A faint pity stirred the deputy. He said gently, "You told me you saw the whole thing. You told me Monahan never made a motion for a gun. Jean just pulled and killed him. What was it you told on the witness stand? That Monahan went for his gun first?"

Martin shifted his gaze. "I don't remember," he said sullenly. "When those lawyers get at you—"

"Not lawyers. Who else got at you, Martin?"

"That's a lie!" Martin shouted instantly. "I know what you're thinking! You think Cole Devoe bought me off. It's a lie!"

"Is it? It's what everybody's thinking."

"To hell with everybody!"

"Jean Targen," Severn continued implacably, "is going to get off clear. Pretty soon he'll shoot somebody else. You won't be popular with the Horse Flats folks after this, Martin. Maybe you'd better pack up and move."

"To hell with 'em!" shouted Martin. "I'll move when I'm good and ready!" He drew the back of his hand across his stiffening lips, then gave a high-pitched laugh. "A lot you've got to talk about," he cried. "You wearing that badge! You're Devoe's man yourself!"

The deputy shrugged. He didn't bother to reply. "Maybe we'd better get moving," he suggested. "We might have company."

They went on. Martin glanced nervously behind him. He gazed at Severn with frightened eyes.

"I'm not scared of 'em," he proclaimed thinly. "That's not why I'm pulling out."

"But you're pulling out."

"Why not? I sold my place the other day."

"Let me guess," said Severn. "You sold to Devoe."

Martin looked down at his hands. "Yes," he muttered.

Severn nodded. The pattern was clear now. The price Martin had received for his switch in testimony was the price Devoe had given him for his small dab of land. Monahan dead and Martin gone—another victory for Cole Devoe, another set-back for the Horse Flats hoemen who were encroaching upon Devoe's barony of land and cattle.

The trail mounted to the rim of Squaw Gorge. Stunted pine, free undergrowth, made a scattering stand here, the shadow-laced way soft with its layer of brown needles. The horses moved quietly.

Martin rode with twisting head and sharp, darting eyes. Severn felt vaguely drawn to the frightened little man. In a way, he mused, he himself was also a frightened man—only his was different from the physical fear that was Martin's. Moodily the deputy thought of the mission which had brought him to Brinker City, a mission that still was unaccomplished. For so long had he hesitated.

HE WHO hesitates, Severn thought wryly, is frightened. Me and Martin! He made a grunting noise deep in his throat.

Martin jerked around. "You say something?"

"No," replied the deputy. "I was just laughing. I was wondering if I shouldn't pull out, too."

Martin didn't seem to hear. He was staring at something beyond the fringe of trees. He pointed a shaking finger.

"Look!"

Obscure amidst the lattice of sun and shadow, jogged a little band of riders, all Horse Flats men, and the last in the line was the black-bearded man who had called after Martin in town.

"Krantz," Martin whispered.

The deputy halted his horse.

"Wait," he counseled.

Severn and Martin sat motionless. The Horse Flats men filed on and were all but lost among the trees. Then they turned, and Severn knew that he and Martin had been seen. The riders angled across to the trail ahead of Severn and Martin. They turned again and came on straight toward the waiting two.

The deputy brushed back his coat, exposing his holstered gun. He shifted to one side, his weight resting almost wholly upon the left stirrup. He scanned the faces of the oncoming men and noted with a gloomy satisfaction that only two of the riders really counted, only two were dangerous. They were the black-bearded middle-aged Otto Krantz who was a kind of leader among the hoemen and small ranchers of Horse Flats, and young Tom Bailey who had been a close friend of the dead Monahan. Krantz was in the fore now, the whole group swinging along with a grim, passionless rhythm.

Severn laid a hand on Martin's knee and felt the trembling of the little man. He spoke out to Krantz, his voice rising softly above the muffled thud of hooves.

"Whoa," he said.

The black-bearded Krantz gazed at him steadily and made no check to his pace. He lifted his right hand, palm forward.

"We have something to say," he answered. He spoke with a slight thickness, each word separate.

Severn sent his horse forward a step. "Whoa!" he said again.

This time, no more than twenty feet away, the Horse Flats men halted. Krantz brought his right hand down, directing a stubby finger at Martin.

"You!" he pronounced in his thick voice. "You will—"

"I'll tell him!" Tom Bailey surged up beside Krantz. He was a big man, muscled like a young stallion and with a wild glint in his eyes. "I'll tell the lying little Judas Iscariot!" he cried chokingly. He stretched forth a curling hand. "See this, Martin? Well, if I ever run across you again, I'll wring your—"

"Shtop it!"

There was the bark of the drillmaster in Krantz's voice now. He grabbed Bailey's arm. Bailey fell sullenly silent. He shook off the restraining grip.

Otto Krantz nodded composedly. "That is better. Remember, we agreed. No trouble."

Severn spoke flatly. "There'll be no trouble, Otto."

Krantz's beady little eyes flickered contemptuously toward the deputy. "But you would like it, is it not so, Severn? You would like a chance to use your gun on one of us the way Jean Targen used his?"

Severn started to reply, then changed his mind. Behind him he heard Martin's quick indrawn breath.

"Now look, Otto," Martin said, earnest-voiced, speciously calm, "I know what you and all the rest are thinking. But it ain't so. Just because . . . Well, when that lawyer got to twisting me around and I—I'm . . . Well—" Martin's voice, weakening under the flinty contemplation of the Horse Flats men, died gaspingly away.

FOR A moment there was silence. Then as if there had been no interruption, Krantz said:

"No, we are not here for trouble. It is to tell you something, Martin. You must leave at once. We do not want a man like you for a neighbor. We do not want to see you again."

"Yeah?" There was an attempt at bluster in Martin's tone. "And supposing I don't want to leave? I've got my rights!"

"No!" Krantz interrupted sternly. "A man like you has no rights. But we think of your wife and children. So we have agreed among ourselves. We will pay you fifteen hundred dollars for your land."

"So that's the game! You want to squeeze me out!" Martin gave his high-pitched laugh. "You're too late, Otto. I've already sold—for twenty-five hundred!"

"You idiot!" cried Severn. "Must you talk?"

Krantz was gently smiling. "Yes," he said, "he must talk. He is that kind. He has betrayed us, and now he betrays himself. Twenty-five hundred is a big price for his place. Too big. The man who paid that got something else for his money. There is only one man who—"

"Cole Devoe!" exclaimed Tom Bailey. He laughed harshly as he pointed at Martin. "Judas," he said, "has got his thirty pieces of silver."

There was a growl and a surging movement from the Horse Flat riders. Severn put his hand to his gun.

Krantz had swung quickly to face his companions.

"Remember," he said sharply, "we have agreed." He looked toward Severn. "He is safe," he remarked in a quieter tone. "But he had better go now."

The deputy studied the black-bearded man, then slowly nodded. He spoke curtly to Martin.

"You won't be bothered. Start traveling."

Martin moved forward. He cringed as he passed the Horse Flats men. He went on, disappearing in the shadowed silence of the pines. Severn guessed that he would never see the little man again. Tomorrow Martin would be pulling out. Behind him he was leav-

ing rancor and unrest and the stalking threat of Devoe's gunman, Jean Targen.

Severn started to turn away, then paused. The Horse Flats men had not stirred. They were waiting for something. They regarded the deputy with stony eyes. Krantz indicated Severn's badge.

"We do not like that, Severn."

"What?" The deputy frowned, not understanding.

"On you," explained Krantz in his heavy way, "that badge is a lie. Jean Targen is Devoe's man. He pretends nothing else. You pretend to be a lawman. We do not like it."

"I see." Severn was sardonically amused. "Anything you want to do about it, Otto?"

Krantz nodded. "We have done it. Before we left town we spoke to Sheriff Trimble. He is a good lawman, but we cannot elect him again if he keeps a deputy like you. That is what we told him."

"And what did he say?" asked Severn.

Krantz shook his head composedly. "Nothing. But he will think about it. There was a time when Devoe could bring in gunmen like you and Jean Targen and run the country. Now it is different. There are more of us and we have votes. Sheriff Trimble knows that."

Severn glanced down at his law badge. His mind ran back to the day he had come here—the two years he had worked for Devoe.

"So you think Devoe brought me here?" he said, without heat. "Like Targen?"

"Would you deny it?" Tom Bailey reined up beside Krantz. His face was flushed and moist. He glared fiercely at Severn. "Who was it got you that deputy job?" he cried. "Wasn't it Devoe? Who was it that kept us from stringing up Jean Targen? You did! You—"

"Shud up!" Krantz had whirled upon Bailey. "We agreed!" he shouted angrily. "No trouble! Now please shud up.'

Bailey shrugged and was quiet. He continued to stare at Severn.

III

SEVERN returned Tom Bailey's stare, his eyes sharp and mocking. Bailey was moved by a personal antagonism that ran deeper than the rift between Devoe and the Horse Flats men. Severn knew it, and he guessed the others did, too. Then he heard Krantz speaking again.

"Yes," Krantz was saying, "I think Devoe brought you here. I think you have a reason for being here. Is it just to do Devoe's gun work? Or are you here for something else?"

The deputy looked at Krantz.

"And that," he replied with drawling emphasis, "is none of your business. Would you like to make it your business?"

"Yes!" roared Tom Bailey suddenly. "I'll make it my business! I want to know about that little place he bought over by North Pass. What did you want with it, Severn?"

"Be still!" ordered Krantz.

"I wont' be still! Maybe Devoe would be interested in knowing the truth about the stock he's been missing! Maybe all of us would!"

"So now I'm a rustler?" Severn laughed harshly. "Am I working for Devoe or rustling from him? Make up your mind, Tom."

Abruptly, without answering, Bailey charged forward.

"Shtop it!" yelled Krantz.

Big Tom Bailey didn't hear. He brought his horse to a plunging halt almost on top of the negligently waiting deputy.

"You and Jean Targen!" he cried furiously. "Devoe's butchers! Well, Targen will never gun down anybody else like he did poor Monahan! *I'll* see to that! And I'll take care of you, too! You—you—" For a moment wrath all but choked the big man.

Severn fought savagely to keep out of big Tom Bailey's grasp

Then he bent toward the deputy, jabbing out his finger. In a venomously soft tone now he said, "And here's something else for you. I know your game with Alice Devoe. She's too—"

Harry Severn struck without warning. The flat smash of his palm across the man's mouth sounded like a whipcrack. Tom Bailey reeled backward. Severn left his saddle. His solid one-hundred-and-seventy-pound weight hit Bailey, and Bailey completed his somersault off his horse. Both men crashed to the ground.

Severn bounced to his knees. He gripped Bailey by the shirt, jerked him forward, and punched him in the face. He released Bailey and swung savagely with both fists.

The big man tried to squirm away; he pawed wildly. He got his hand on Severn's wrist. Instantly his other hand was clutching the deputy. Seven struggled to get free. He was amazingly strong, big Tom Bailey was. He had the crushing embrace of a bear.

Severn rolled back and forth. He pumped his elbows to Bailey's ribs. Dimly he was aware of boots tramping close to him. He heard Otto Krantz's excited shouting. Abruptly Bailey transferred his grip to Severn's throat.

The deputy felt his eyes bulging. He was strangling; his chest was on fire. Desperately he tried to put his knees in Bailey's stomach. Then a weight landed heavily on his shoulder and at almost the same time Bailey relaxed his dreadful grip.

Someone pulled the deputy to a sitting position. His mouth was open, pulling in gasping draughts of air. His vision cleared and he gazed up into the hostile, threatening faces of the Horse Flats men. His hand went to his gun. The gun was gone.

"No, you don't!" someone growled, and both his arms were tightly clasped.

There was no use struggling, for he was helpless. The deputy sat quiet, breathing deeply, staring with dawning comprehension at the inert form of Big Tom Bailey. The black-bearded Krantz was bending over the unconscious man, holding a gun. Krantz, the deputy guessed, must have slugged Tom Bailey with the gun.

Krantz looked at the others. "It was necessary," he said regretfully. "We agreed. We wanted no trouble."

No one answered.

Krantz straightened and holstered his gun. He spoke sternly to the deputy. "You will leave before Bailey comes around. There will be no more fighting." He nodded to the men holding Severn. "Let him go now."

Severn's arms were released. He stood up and brushed off his coat.

"My gun," he mumured.

"No!" said someone.

"Yes!" said Krantz. "Give it back to him!"

SEVERN felt his gun slipped into its pouch.

Krantz gently shook his head. "I'm not afraid," he said. "I think you are a gunman. I am not a gunman, but I am not afraid. I think somewhere you are wanted by the law. I will try to find out about that. In the end we will get rid of you and Jean Targen and men like you. We will show men like Cole Devoe that they are not kings. Then this will be good country."

The deputy was silent. His wild anger was gone. He considered the black-bearded Krantz with grudging respect. Krantz, he decided, was pretty much of a man.

"You will go now!" said Krantz.

Severn nodded vaguely and moved toward his horse. As he swung into saddle, he saw that Tom Bailey was beginning to stir. The deputy paused.

"Otto!" he called.

"Well?" Krantz glanced up coldly.

Severn pointed to Tom Bailey. "Keep him away from Jean Targen, Otto. He'll kill him. Jean will, I mean. Tom won't have a prayer."

"And what do you care?" Krantz raised his eyebrows. "Do you pretend now that you love Tom Bailey?"

The deputy shrugged. "No," he said wearily. "Forget it. Let him get killed if he wants to." He spat and rode stiffly away.

He left the Horse Flats trail and rode eastward. Here the deputy was on Devoe's range. Boxed D cattle grazed listlessly on the shadowed eastern slopes of the hillocks. A band of horses, tails and manes streaming, flowed over a ridge line ahead of him. Once, distantly, he glimpsed two of Devoe's riders. The riders waved before they passed from view.

To the north, near the notch in the steeply rising foothills, was Harry Severn's small cabin and few acres of grazing and woodland. He had bought the place cheaply from a departing homesteader. True, he never stayed there. In fact, the deputy hadn't even seen his place in the last month. Nevertheless, it was still there, and it was his. Ownership of land gave a man a feeling of solidarity. it was like having a nest-egg in the bank.

The sun dropped and rested warmly on the deputy's back and his thick shoulders. He rode slowly, his head bent in scowling meditation, thinking of young Tom Bailey. Also, he was thinking of Alice Devoe. Tom Bailey and Alice had just about grown up together. Alice, despite all she said to the contrary, still liked Tom pretty well.

Severn lost his scowl. He pulled out the makings and rolled a cigarette. Actually, he guessed, he didn't need to worry much about competition from Tom Bailey. Tom wasn't likely to be around long. He would try to kill Jean Targen to avenge Monahan's death, and he would surely get a bullet for his pains. Exit young Tom Bailey!

The deputy's tough, dark features twisted in a faint grin. He had been raised in a hard school. You took advantage of the breaks. Otto Krantz had been right. It wasn't, he thought defiantly, any of his business if Tom wanted to get himself killed!

He puffed furiously for a moment, then pinched out his cigarette and tossed it away. He puckered his lips as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. Resolutely he stopped thinking about Tom Bailey.

Severn's horse moved more rapidly. The animal knew now where they were going. Below, sprawled on a gentle slope, was Cole Devoe's squat, L-shaped ranch house and its numerous outbuildings.

Severn rode up and dismounted by the barn corral. He unsaddled and watered his horse and put it up in the barn, then went to the cookshack. A little old man with a whiskery monkey face appeared at the doorway.

The old man's name was Duffy and he had been with Cole Devoe a long time. He had a game leg and his temper was uncertain. Severn nodded to him cautiously, filled a basin and began washing.

Duffy spoke abruptly. "It ain't chow time yet."

"All right."

Severn emptied the basin and wiped it out with a nearby roller-towel. He dried his face and hands on a handkerchief and ran his fingers through his heavy black hair.

"Of course," Duffy went on petulantly, "you might go up to the house and get a hand-out from Mrs. Fenner. If your stummick can stand that fancy grub of hers."

"I might, at that," agreed the deputy. He brushed dust from his clothing.

DUFFY made a snorting sound. He had a feud on with Mrs. Fenner, Devoe's housekeeper. Duffy did not approve of her style of cooking.

"Probably," the old man grumbled, "you're going up to the house anyway. All that duding up!"

"Probably," said the deputy.

Duffy repeated the snorting sound. He stamped into the cookshack.

"Got some mulligan on," he called back angrily. "Probably, though, you're getting too fine-haired for man's grub these days."

Severn suppressed a smile. "Thanks, Duffy," he said humbly.

He went into the cookshack and sat down by the stove. Duffy ladled out a bowl of mulligan for him, poured a mug full of coffee. The coffee was so black it left a faint stain where it slopped against the mug.

"That," proclaimed Duffy, "is *man's* coffee!" He set a wedge of dried apple pie beside the mug.

While Severn ate, Duffy leaned upon a dough table and observed him with scowling disapprobation. Severn finished the last crumb of pie and drained the coffee mug. He patted his stomach.

"Now there," announced the deputy, "was man's grub!"

Duffy grunted. His scowl became less severe. It was plain he was pleased. He dragged out a corncob pipe.

The deputy rolled a cigarette. "Devoe back yet?"

"Uh-uh." Duffy shook his head. "Trial over?"

"Ought to be. I left before it wound up."

For a time the two smoked in silence.

"Martin switched his testimony," the deputy murmured then. "Says now Monahan drew first."

Duffy put away his pipe. A long glance of understanding passed between the two men.

"Martin," said Severn, "is pulling out. He got twenty-five hundred for that little pea-patch of his. Twenty-five hundred!"

"What did you expect?" asked Duffy. "Devoe hired Jean Targen, didn't he? Did you expect he'd let 'em hang him?"

"I don't know what I expected." Severn looked down at his law badge. "Maybe I let the shine of this thing get in my eyes."

"The law's all right," Duffy replied mildly. "Maybe everything was all right. Maybe Martin really did see Monahan draw first."

"Maybe." The deputy gave a brief laugh. "I guess a man can see most anything when the price is right."

"Uh-huh. And the other way around, too."

"What?"

"How's Peg Teller?"

"All right, I reckon. I was talking to her this morning." The deputy frowned. "What's she got to do with it?"

"Just making my point clear," Duffy replied drily. "Sometimes a man can't see nothing when the price is not right."

Severn stood up angrily. "Some day, Duffy, you're going to say too much for your good."

"No, I'm not. That's the fun of being old, Harry. You can say what you want to and nobody won't hit you. I take advantage of it." The old cook grinned maliciously. "Think you're a pretty hard case, don't you, Harry? Well, you're not. You're just as human as anybody. What you scared of, Harry?"

"What!" Severn gave a start.

Duffy slapped his thigh delightedly. "Got you that time, Harry! I've watched you a lot, and I always figured you were scared."

"You keep your figuring to yourself!" shouted Severn. He took a step forward.

Duffy calmly shook his head. "I won't, neither! And you can't make me! Me, I'm not scared of nothing nor nobody. Not you or Jean Targen or Cole Devoe or—or—" The old cook's expression changed. "Yes, I am, too. Did you ever notice her eyes, Harry? Look at 'em close some time. You can see the whites all around. They're glazed kind of like china."

The deputy turned toward the door. "I think," he said wearily, "that

you're a little crazy, Duffy."

"Yeah? Well, I'll tell you something. Cole Devoe's scared of her, too. What you think of that?"

The deputy laughed. "You've got Mrs. Fenner on the brain, Duffy! You think she's going to poison Cole?"

"Her? That old battle-ax! Who's talking about her?" Duffy snorted his disgust. "You're too dumb to live, Harry. Well, maybe you won't live long . . . No, don't grin—I mean it! I mean it! I kind of like you, Harry, so I'm telling you. I've got a hunch that one of these fine days the boss will sick Jean Targen on you."

"Eh?" Severn sobered instantly. He leaned against the door jamb and rubbed his chin. "Now why," he asked curiously, "would Cole Devot want to sick Jean Targen on me?"

"I didn't say Cole Devoe. I said the *boss!*"

IV

INTENTLY Severn gazed at Duffy. The old cook returned the stare. Then. abruptly, as if losing interest in the conversation, he went to the stove. He spoke casually above the rattling of a stove-lid.

"I hear Mrs. Devoe is coming back from her visit East. Cole expects her tomorrow."

"That's nice." Severn kept rubbing his chin. Slowly he said, "It don't sound reasonable. Even if she did have something against me, she wouldn't get . . . Why, great glory, Duffy! That's enough to raise the hair on your head! The idea of a high-class woman like her getting Jean Targen to gun anybody!"

"I've been around here a long time," cut in Duffy. " know some hair-raising things." He lowered his voice impressively. "I can tell you this, Harry—Cole Devoe is a haunted man. Him and her both. There's a spook they can't lay. I could tell you more, but I ain't going to."

The deputy was tactfully silent. He had the conviction that old Duffy needed a long rest.

Duffy nodded. "I know what you're thinking—I'm old and crazy. Maybe I am. Don't pay no attention to *me!*" He banged the stove-lid in a show of rage. "Now get out of here! Get!"

The deputy left the cookshack, wondering if Duffy really were crazy Crazy or not, the old man could make uncomfortable remarks.

Why had he mentioned Peg Teller? And why say he, Harry Severn, was scared? Actually, he wasn't scared—not the way old Duffy meant. Only sometimes there were things which a man would do better by not knowing. Sometimes there was a darkness of the past that it would be better to leave in the darkness.

Forget it! he thought angrily. Forget what you came here for. It's a hard world. Take what you can get and let dead bones lie.

Shadows were growing longer. Two of Devoe's riders were loping in toward the barns. Another man, washing behind the cookshack, hesitated there, frowning morosely at the big ranch house.

The house was laid out in two low, wide wings, built of huge logs that had been dragged a long distance down from the mountains. Skilled workmen had erected the house, and it was a proper abode for a cattle baron. It would be pleasant, Severn was thinking, to own a ranch and house like this one. Very pleasant.

Well, why not? Cole Devoe couldn't last forever, could he?

The deputy lost his frown. He settled his coat and squared his shoulders. He strode forward.

At the front of the ranch house, where the wings joined, was a broad, roofed gallery furnished with tables and chairs. As Severn stepped up on the gallery, the house door opened and a girl popped out. Instantly Severn swept off his hat.

The girl was slender and fair. She had a demure, oval face, blue eyes and

willful—and somewhat pouting—lips. She was nineteen years old and her name was Alice Devoe. She considered Severn with a mock severity.

"I had begun to think," she said, "that you weren't coming up to the house. I saw you ride up. Whatever were you doing all this time in the cookshack?"

Severn grinned. "Getting a handout. Your father home yet?"

She shook her head and opened her eyes wide. "Sorry?"

"Well—" said Severn cautiously.

The answer seemed to satisfy her. She flashed him a smile and twirled on her heels.

"Let's go inside. It's cooler."

Severn followed her into the broad hallway and then into a living room. The room was large, oak-beamed, wainscoted with some dark wood and finished off with a dull white plaster. There were a few oil paintings of a uniform dreariness that did not appeal to the deputy, a crystal chandelier which he did admire, and a scattering of both heavy and fragile furniture. In one corner of the room was a piano which Alice played indifferently, and on top of the piano was a violin belonging to her brother, and which he played not at all.

At the girl's designation, Severn sat down gingerly on a ponderous settee. As always when in the presence of this moneyed grandeur, the deputy felt a measure of constraint.

ALICE sat down opposite him in a straight-backed needle-point chair and primly clasped her hands in her lap.

"How's sheriffing?" she asked companionably.

"Well—"

"It's not well at all!" she retorted. "D'you know how long it's been since you were out here? Over a week! When you were working for Father, you were right here. We could see each other every day."

"Well—" said Severn again. Alice had her moments of bluntness which he found a trifle disconcerting.

Abruptly her manner was serious. "How'd the trial come out?"

"I don't know. I left early. But I can guess. Martin switched his testimony. Gave Jean a clean bill of health."

"Then Jean will get off."

"I think so."

The girl looked toward the window. She said remotely, "Monahan, the man Jean killed, was a pretty good friend of Tom Bailey's."

"So I've heard."

"Do you think Tom will try to take it up now? I mean, will he try to start something with Jean Targen?"

"Maybe. He'd better not. I don't know." Severn bent an intent glance upon the girl. She was still gazing toward the window.

"Tom used to come here a lot," she said in an expressionless voice. "We all liked him. But then when Father began to have trouble with those farmers coming in on Horse Flats, and Tom stuck up for them—well, that kind of ended it. I can't understand a man like that turning against his own kind of people."

"Maybe Tom likes farmers," said Severn.

"Well, I don't!" She swung toward him. "I hate a farmer!" she cried savagely. "Digging and building fences! Moving right in like they owned the country! And they always look so—so hungry. They look at you like a pack of wolves. I hate anyone that would stick up for them!"

Severn thought of the black-bearded Krantz. His throat still ached from Tom Bailey's strong, throttling fingers.

"Personally," he remarked feelingly, "I don't care for farmers, either."

The girl resumed her prim attitude. "See Bob in town?"

"Your brother? Uh-uh. guess he's there, though."

"I guess he is," Alice agreed acidly. "And hanging around Peg Teller, I

bet. A common gambler's daughter! I don't know what Bob can see in her."

The deputy frowned. "You're wrong there, Alice. Peg is mighty fine folks. It ain't her fault her father is a gambler. Peg's had a pretty tough life."

"I can believe that." Alice smiled sweetly. "You can almost tell it just by looking at her."

Severn was stiffly silent. The conversation was going sour.

As if aware of his mood, Alice abruptly changed her topic. She leaned forward.

"I wish, Harry," she said earnestly, "that Father would get rid of Jean Targen. Did you think you could say something to him about it?"

The deputy nodded soberly. "I had that in mind when I stopped here. I don't know how much good it will do."

"I—I'm scared of him, Harry. He's so soft-footed. He comes up on you when you never expect it. And the way he looks at you!"

"Yeah? Jean ever bother you any, did he, Alice?"

"What?" The girl looked blank, then suddenly laughed. "Gracious, no! Not *that* way! I just mean that he looks at you so sly, like he's laughing at you all the time. And I think he and Bob are getting awful friendly. I don't like that. I don't know—" Alice broke off as if struck by a new thought. She gazed obliquely at the deputy. "What would you do, Harry, if Jean did bother me?"

"That's something that hasn't happened."

She gave a thrilled shiver. "Would you gun-fight him, Harry?"

"Stop that sort of talk!" Severn said sharply.

"I'll bet you could, Harry. Maybe not, though. The men say Jean is awful fast with a gun. I wouldn't want . . . You never talk about yourself, do you, Harry? About before you came here."

"No," said Severn.

She nodded wisely. "I'll bet you've done all kinds of things. I'll bet you could—" Alice looked around.

MRS. FENNER had appeared at the hall doorway. The tall,

DOG-GONE MUSIC

ZEB'S city cousin came to visit him on his Texas farm one summer. Zeb decided that it would be interesting to his friend to take him on a coon hunt with his prize hounds. About dusk they set out in the station wagon with the dogs in back.

Arriving at a pretty likely spot, Zeb stopped, turned the dogs loose, and sent them off through the woods. Before long the dogs picked up the scent. One could hear the hounds as each one sounded off. The city cousin just stood there waiting for whatever was supposed to happen next.

Finally Zeb remarked enthusiastically, "Ed, did you ever hear such sweet music in all yore life?"

Ed cupped one hand over an ear, and shook his head in the negative. "I don't hear no music," he said. "But I might be able to if them damned dogs would shut up!"

—Howie Lasseter

hatchet-faced housekeeper stared at Severn with chilling suspicion. Her thin nostrils twitched disdainfully. She quietly withdrew.

Alice made a face. "Old Nosey!" she whispered. She arose, tiptoed to the door, and listened.

Presently Severn heard the clatter of a dish in the kitchen.

Alice nodded her satisfaction. She came toward the center of the room and paused there. She gave the deputy her oblique glance and looked down at her feet. Idly she drew a cross on the floor with the toe of her shoe. She didn't say anything.

The deputy remained stolidly on the settee. He considered the girl critically. She was young and undeniably pretty. Very young for her nineteen years.

Alice stopped her fidgeting. She laughted lightly and went to a picture on the far wall.

"Did you see this, Harry? It's a new one. Father just bought it."

Without enthusiasm he crossed the room to examine the picture. Alice stood so close she brushed against him. Abruptly Severn realized that it was not a new picture. This particular picture had been here a long time. He looked at the girl.

She smiled enigmatically. Her face was uptilted and her eyes were dreamy.

"Like it?" she murmured.

The invitation was plain. He guessed she wasn't so young after all. He gripped her shoulders and, for a brief moment, stood motionless. Then he kissed her roughly, angrily, and thrust her from him.

She sighed faintly. "I didn't know, Harry, that you—" She gasped and whirled away.

Someone was at the front door. Cole Devoe entered the room.

V

AS AN indication of his wealth, the cattleman wore a large ruby ring on his left hand. As a gesture toward his calling, he was shod in an old, run-down pair of riding boots. Beyond that, in his shabby gray suit, Cole Devoe might have passed for a small-town bank clerk.

He was slightly built and a trifle stooped. His features were pale and of a hawkish cast. His movements, as he came into the room, were briskly nervous.

He nodded curtly to the deputy. "Glad you're here, Harry. I wanted to see you. Come into the office." As an aside to the girl he said, "Tell Mrs. Fenner I already ate." He wheeled and left the room.

Severn got his hat from the settee and followed Devoe. When he looked back, Alice was moving toward the kitchen. She twiddled her fingers and blew him a kiss.

Devoe's office was across the hallway from the living room, a relatively small room furnished with several leather chairs, a bookcase, two desks —a rolltop and a table-top—and a dilapidated sofa. Harry Severn settled himself on the sofa. Devoe closed the door and held out a box of cigars.

"Smoke, Harry?"

Severn selected one of the fat black torpedoes with the proper feeling of reverence and anticipation; he had smoked Devoe's cigars before. Devoe took a cigar himself and sat down at the large table-top desk, facing Severn. There were two books on the desk, one on diseases of cattle, the other on public speaking. Devoe, so it was rumored, had political aspirations.

The cattleman lighted his cigar and spoke crisply.

"Sheriff Trimble tells me you took Martin home," he said. "Any trouble?"

"No-o. Otto Krantz came after us. He just talked. Martin will be leaving. About tomorrow, I'd say."

Devoe nodded. "I expected that."

"Also," said Severn, "Krantz talked to me."

"I know. He had words with the sheriff about you. Wants you out of the sheriff's office."

"And he's right. I'm quitting as deputy."

"Indeed? That I didn't expect!"

"Well, I am," Severn said stubbornly. "You got me the job in the first place, and Krantz and the rest think I'm your man. That puts Trimble right in the middle. He's a pretty good man and I like him, so . . . Well, I'm quitting."

"I see. Then what are you going to do?"

Severn shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe move out on the place I got near North Pass."

Devoe smiled. "Supposing," he said, "I was to tell you confidentially that Sheriff Trimble is not going to run for office this election. Would it make any difference about your quitting?"

Severn hesitated, then shook his head. "Nope. As long as I'm wearing this badge, it puts Trimble in trouble. Folks will say—" Severn interrupted himself to stare suspiciously at Devoe. "I never heard Trimble say anything about not running again."

"Nevertheless, it's true. We had a talk this afternoon and we decided—or rather, he decided that he was getting a little too old for the job. What we need here is a younger, a more aggressive man. A man, might I say, who has the broader, the more basic interests of the locality at heart." Devoe smiled again and blew a smoke ring.

The oratorical trimmings didn't fool Severn in the least. He knew exactly what Devoe meant. Devoe meant that he was kicking out Trimble because the sheriff was too conscientious about the rights of the Horse Flats hoemen. What Devoe wanted in office was a typical rangeland bully-boy.

"You can't do it," Severn said flatly. "D'you know how many votes Otto Krantz can swing?"

Devoe moved his head pityingly. "Votes are not everything. I think Mr. Krantz will find that out. There are certain things in politics that . . . The devil with that!" Devoe suddenly had lost his suavity. His voice crackled. "I *can* do it! And by thunder I *will* do it!" He jabbed his cigar at Severn. "Understand?"

The deputy didn't answer. When Devoe was in this mood, argument was not diplomatic.

DEVOE apparently expected no answer.

He leaned back and reflectively considered his cigar. "How old are you, Harry?"

"Twenty-five. Why?"

"How would you like to be our next sheriff, Harry?"

"I wondered if that was coming." The deputy arose and strode to the window. He stood there, his back to the cattleman.

"No hurry, Harry." Devoe's voice ran out smoothly behind him. "Think it over. Remember, it's not a question of loyalty to Trimble. He's out, whatever you do. It's just a question of his age."

"I know." Severn gave a short laugh. "It's just a question of getting the right men to strong-arm the hoemen. Me and Jean! By the way, how'd the trial come out?"

"Jean Targen was acquitted. Naturally, when Martin unexpectedly retracted his charge."

"Save it, Cole," Severn broke in harshly. "I know just how unexpected it was—for you." He turned to face Devoe.

Devoe sprang from his chair, pointed a shaking finger at Severn. "You!" he cried out. "I know you! Where have I seen you before?"

"What?" Severn stared in amazement. He wondered if Devot had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

Devoe dropped back into his chair. He passed a hand across his eyes and shook his head.

"Sorry, Harry," he said weakly. "It was your side view. The way you

were standing at the window and when you turned around. I—I never did see you, did I? I mean somewheres before you came here?"

"No," said Severn. "Not that I know of."

Devoe fumbled in a desk drawer. He brought out a bottle and a glass. "Drink, Harry?"

"No, thanks."

Devoe poured himself a slug of whisky and downed it. He wiped his lips and essayed a feeble smile.

"There are times," he said apologetically, "when you catch a resemblance in a person to someone you knew long ago. A common enough experience, I reckon, but sometimes it can be—well, kind of surprising."

Severn gazed curiously at the cattleman. He guessed that old Duffy was right, after all. Devoe *was* a haunted man. What ghost of the past was nagging at him?

"How old did you say you are, Harry? Twenty-five?"

"That's right."

Devoe dropped his gaze. He seemed to shiver. When he looked up again, his eyes were steady and controlled. He glanced at the door.

"Well, think over that sheriff job, Harry," he said crisply.

"How about Jean Targen? Are you going to keep him on?"

Instantly Devoe stiffened. "That's my business."

"All right. Here's another thing. Have you missed any cattle lately? Enough to show rustling?"

"No. What made you ask that?"

The deputy shrugged. "Nothing. Just some talk I heard." He leaned both hands on the desk. "You better get rid of Targen," he said in a low voice. "Who's next on the list? Otto Krantz? You can't keep on buying off witnesses."

"You forget yourself!" cried Devoe angrily. "Any time I want advice from you, Harry, I'll—" Devoe paused. He smiled a bleak, thin smile. "No," he said clearly. "I am not going to get rid of Targen. If necessary, I'll hire more men like him." He held out a lean hand and slowly closed his fist. "What I have, I keep. What I want, I go after. Understand, Harry?"

"Yeah, I understand." Severn stuck on his hat and turned away.

There was a knocking at the door.

"Father! Ted Gamboy wants to see you." It was Alice's voice.

"All right," Devoe replied impatiently. "In a minute."

Severn waited with his hand on the latch, listening to Alice's retreating footsteps. He swung back toward Devoe.

"You know," he said musingly, "I think I'll take a page out of your book, Cole."

"So? What do you mean by that?"

"What you want, you go after. Don't be too surprised, Cole, if I try that myself." He opened the door and went out.

TED GAMBOY, Devoe's foreman, was standing in the hallway. He nodded coldly as Severn passed. The deputy left the house and went to the barn, brought out his horse and saddled it.

Jean Targen came to the corral. "Good evening, my friend," he said suavely. "I got free, you see. Where's your congratulations?"

Severn ignored the gunman. He climbed into saddle.

Targen laughed quietly. "Don't pull your lawman's airs on me, Harry. We both work for the same man, don't we?"

The deputy glanced down at him. "You think so?"

"Yep. And I've a feeling it'll be a bad day for you when you stop thinking so."

"Or a bad day for you."

"It's possible," Targen agreed cheerfully. "In our trade we can expect the unexpected. Both of us know that. Take what comes, and forget what's past. Right, Harry?"

The deputy stared, then inclined his

head. "Yes," he replied harshly, "you're right, Jean. Forget what's past!"

He moved off. Behind him he heard Jean Targen's sly laughter.

The sun had gone and dusk was settling. Severn rode slumped in the saddle, and scowling. The cigar Devoe had given him had long since gone out. He had worried the stump until it was a soggy, bitter brush. He flung it angrily away.

A rider was coming along the road toward him. The man bobbed his head in greeting.

"Stranger," he called, "this the way to Devoe's place?"

"That's right. Keep on."

The rider passed by. He was gaunt and long-limbed, and there was a white stubble on his sunken cheeks. Severn stared after him, a dull spark of memory flickering. Somewhere he had seen that angular, bony frame before. Somewhere before he had heard that unlovely, nasal voice.

The man glanced back over his shoulder. His face was no more than a blur in the deepening gloom. His horse *clip-clopped* steadily on. The road dipped, and horse and rider vanished.

Severn felt a prickling at the nape of his neck. He wheeled his horse to follow, changed his mind, and wheeled again. He kept on toward town.

You're crazy! he told himself disgustedly. You're seeing things. You're as bad as Devoe.

His hand moved behind him. Beneath coat and shirt his exploring fingertips located faint welts across his back.

The welts were the long-healed scars of a bull whip.

For a moment the deputy's features became savagely contorted, then he shook his head.

"No," he muttered. "It can't be. Not here. Not *him!* It's impossible!"

He reached in his pocket for tobacco sack and papers. With fumbling hands he tried to roll a cigarette.

VI

WHEN Harry Severn left the office, Cole Devoe sat quietly at his desk, staring emptily into space. Then he became aware that his foreman, Ted Gamboy, was still standing in the open doorway. The cattleman scowled.

"All right," he said. "Come in!"

Gamboy came in. "You sick?" he asked.

"Sick? No! I was just thinking." Devoe shook his head irritably. "What is it you want, Ted?"

Gamboy, a compactly built man of sixty with weather seamed features, had worked ten years for Cole Devoe. He was a good foreman, although at times his speech was a bit too blunt for Devoe's taste. This was one of the times when he chose to be blunt.

"Cole, are you going to get rid of Jean Targen?" he asked.

Devoe was equally blunt. "No!" he almost shouted.

"Wasn't that Severn that just came out of here?"

"Saw him, didn't you?"

Gamboy nodded composedly. "Yeah, I saw him. Maybe I see more than you do, Cole." Gamboy's voice became earnest. "Get rid of 'em both, Cole. Don't keep neither Targen or Severn hanging around."

"Tarnation!" exploded Devoe. "How many are trying to run my business? You stick to handling cattle!"

"Sorry," said Gamboy without any particular apology in his tone. "I spoke out of turn. Cattle's what I came to see you about. Somebody's been doing a little rustling."

"The devil! Severn just asked me about that!"

Gamboy showed interest. "What'd he say?"

"Not much. Just asked if we were losing any. Is it bad?"

"Nope. Maybe twenty head at a clip. Tom Bailey's the one who put me wise. Said he'd run across the

tracks in the hills, and he told me so we wouldn't try to hang it onto the Horse Flats folks."

"Tom Bailey? You believe *him?*"

"Far as I'm concerned," Gamboy retorted, "Tom Bailey is honest. I'd trust him anywheres."

"All right—all right!" Devoe cut in testily. "If there's rustlers, go after 'em. Take Jean Targen and—"

"Uh-uh." Gamboy shook his head. "No Jean Targen. I'll handle this rustling in my own way, or quit. That's final, Cole."

Devoe shrugged. Sometimes compromise paid dividends. Foremen as good as Gamboy didn't grow on every bush.

"All right," he said, "handle it your own way, Ted. Any idea who it is?"

"No-o." There was an intonation there which caught Devoe's attention. He looked inquiringly at his foreman. "Maybe," Gamboy murmured, "it might be just as well to let it slide this time. We can probably stop it if we post a warning and let 'em know we're on to 'em."

"A warning? To rustlers? What you driving at, Ted?"

"Nothing much." Gamboy shifted his gaze. "I was just thinking it might turn out to be some pretty good friend of yours."

"I don't care if it turns out to be my own grandmother!" Devoe stated warmly. "If there's rustling, go after who's doing it! And get 'em! That's orders, Ted."

Gamboy nodded. He turned toward the door.

"Just a minute, Ted." Devoe gave a nervous laugh. "I've been wondering . . . You mentioned Severn. Do you know anything about him?"

"No," said Gamboy. "He worked here under me two years and he's not lazy—I know that much." His voice became faintly malicious. "I figured you knew something about him, seeing you got him his law job."

Devoe lowered his gaze. He decided to let the last remark pass.

"Sometimes," he said reflectively, "I get the notion that Severn didn't just drift in here, that maybe he had a reason."

"I've had that notion a long time."

Devoe looked up. "Did he ever drop a hint?" he asked eagerly. "Ever give you any idea what he was after?"

"No," said Gamboy. "How'd he know we were losing cattle?"

"I don't know. Said he heard it."

"The rustlers do their driving toward North Pass, past that little place of Severn's," said Gamboy.

Devoe frowned. "And you think he's in on it?"

Gamboy hesitated, then shook his head. "No-o. I reckon not. It's possible, but I don't think so."

Devoe's face cleared. "I don't, either. Somehow I can't imagine him running off a few head of cattle. If he went after anything, it'd be bigger game than that."

GAMBOY gave him a peculiar glance. "Yeah," he agreed, "I believe it would be. Well, if it does turn out that way, don't forget you're the one that keeps him hanging around." Gamboy left.

Devoe poured himself another slug of whisky. He clasped his hands behind his head and gazed ruminatively at the ceiling.

Cole Devoe would have liked to think of himself as a self-made man. Actually, he was not. There was a large element of luck in his success and wealth.

Cole Devoe's luck had struck, somewhat like lightning, nearly a quarter of a century ago when a Brinker City stage had been caught and overturned by a roaring flash flood out of Blackhole Canyon. In the stage had been a whisky drummer with the improbable name of Hoppelscoot, and a Mrs. Jason Porter and her infant son, Jason Porter, Jr.

A rescue party had pried the drowned bodies of Hopplescoot and Mrs. Jason Porter out of the wrecked

coach. A month afterwards the body of Jason Porter, Jr. had been found and identified, six miles down canyon from the scene of the smash-up.

Two weeks more, and lightning struck had again. Jason Porter himself had died of pneumonia.

At the time Cole Devoe had been Porter's cattle foreman. Porter had had a liking for Devoe and great confidence in the younger man's ability and integrity. Porter's will—a holograph, and drawn up before the stage disaster—made that plain. He had named Cole Devoe administrator for his estate which had been divided between Porter's wife and son. A paragraph of it had read:

> And in the event of the decease of my son Jason Robert Porter prior to his majority, and-or the decease of my wife Mary Christine Porter prior to the day when my son Jason Robert Porter attains his majority, I then name the aforementioned Cole Howard Devoe as heir to that division of my property which shall revert to the estate.

Even today, if he concentrated, Cole Devoe could quote verbatim from the involved, pseudo-legal phraseology of Porter's self-composed will. He should have been able to. The will—that and the wreck of the stage—had made him a rich man.

Generally Devoe preferred not to examine too closely into the past. He preferred to keep his thoughts on a daily basis. There were times, though, when the mind played odd tricks on a man. Such as today when Harry Severn had turned from the window with the light behind him. Strange, the fleeting resemblance Devoe had noted, as if the past suddenly had taken on formidable substance. Pure fancy, of course, but—but disquieting.

"Father?"

"Eh!" Devoe jerked around. He saw Alice in the doorway.

"Father, did Harry say anything to you about me?"

Mentally, as he had done many times in the past few years, Devoe noted that his daughter was growing up. She was becoming a remarkably pretty young woman. He smiled indulgently.

"And what would Harry say about you, my dear?"

"Nothing, I guess." Alice entered the office slowly. "I just thought he might have. I was talking to him before you came home."

"So you were. I remember." Devoe shook his head. "I'm not so sure I approve of that, Alice. These unchaperoned talks with—with . . . Well, with a man like Harry. After all, you're not a child any more."

"I think he realizes that—now. You like him, don't you?"

"I suppose so. But—"

Devoe drummed his fingers on the desk top. Why did all conversation seem to turn to Severn?

"When is Mother coming home?" asked Alice. "Tomorrow?"

Devoe nodded. He stopped drumming his fingers.

"Poor Daddy!"

"What?"

"You heard me," said Alice softly. "Poor all of us! Did you ever really love her, Daddy?"

Devoe stared at his daughter in shocked speechlessness.

Calmly, and before Devoe could protest, she had picked up the whisky bottle from the desk and taken a swallow.

"Alice!" cried the horrified Devoe.

She took another swallow and set the bottle down.

"Sometimes," she said huskily, "it helps, doesn't it, Father? Incidentally, I lied to you. I wasn't talking to Harry Severn when you came in. I was kissing him."

"You *what!*"

DEVOE forgot all about the whisky. He wondered if he was hearing aright. He gripped the desk.

"Do you mean, Alice," he asked in a deadly quiet tone, "that Harry Severn dared lay a hand on you?"

"Not at all. I said *I* was kissing *him.* Harry didn't have much to do with it."

She smiled coolly. "I'm a lot like you, Father. I go after what I want."

Devoe pulled himself erect. "Alice, you must be mad! If I believed for one minute that you—"

"Stop it!" Alice interrupted harshly. She made a pushing gesture. "Sit down, Father. Don't try preaching. How about the house on Plummer Street?"

Devoe drooped, limply. He crouched back in his chair.

"How," he whispered, "did you know about that?"

"I know. Don't worry. I won't tell. At least, I don't think I will. But don't —let—anything—happen to Harry Severn."

The girl's gaze was stony; her face was coldly masklike. Almost Devoe was convinced that he was in the presence of a stranger. Suddenly her gaze relented. She rushed to his side and rested her soft cheek against his.

"Is it hard to realize that I'm grown up?" she murmured.

Feebly Devoe tried to push her away. "Alice, I don't know what to think."

"Yes, you do. I'm your daughter. Whatever else we are, whatever happens, you're my father, and I'm your daughter.

Devoe closed his eyes. His thoughts were incoherent. He felt as if he were being drawn into some chill black morass. He reached desperately for his daughter's hand.

"Yes," he responded in a low voice. "Yes, Alice."

"Poor Daddy," she repeated.

She kissed him lightly and stepped back. Devoe heard her leave the office. . . .

Cole Devoe finally aroused himself. He lifted his head from the desk. The office was gloomy. Mrs. Fenner was lighting the lamps in the hallway. She stood at the office door, a taper in her hand.

"Come in," said Devoe. His tone was clipped, controlled.

Mrs. Fenner came in and lighted the office lamp.

Devoe took thought of his son. "Bob home?" he asked.

"Not yet. Alice is in her room. Said she didn't feel so good." Mrs. Fenner started to leave, but paused. "It's tomorrow Mrs. Devoe is coming home, isn't it?"

"So she wrote me."

Mrs. Fenner's lips were primly thinned. "How long's she going to stay this time?"

"I don't know," Devoe replied coldly.

Mrs. Fenner's lips became even thinner. She seemed about to speak, and then to think better of it. She went out.

VII

DEVOE settled himself in his chair and opened his book on public speaking. He found it tough going. The printed words had a tendency to run together and blur. Determinedly, like a man bucking snowdrifts, Devoe charged again and again at each paragraph until he had the sense of the thing.

He looked up. Mrs. Fenner had returned.

"There's a man out back to see you, Mr. Devoe. He says it's important.

Devoe closed his book and scowled. "Who is it?"

Mrs. Fenner sniffed. "A range tramp, I'd say. He said to tell you his name is Hoppelscoot. I never heard such a name."

Devoe was not aware that he had risen, nevertheless he was now standing.

"What was that name?" he asked unbelievingly.

"Hoppelscoot. But if you ask me, I think—" Mrs. Fenner began to back away. "Why, what's the matter, Mr. Devoe? Are you sick?"

"No!" Devoe interrupted grimly. "I'm not! I'm perfectly all right!" He smiled to prove it. "Maybe," he said,

"I might see him. What an odd name! Bring him in, Mrs. Fenner."

Mrs. Fenner nodded. She looked frightened. She left hastily. Devoe sat down weakly. Ordinarily he was a man of great self-possession. But he had received so many jolts this evening. And now—

And now, what? He composed his features and waited.

The man who appeared at the office doorway was indeed a range tramp. His garb, his whole demeanor proclaimed it. He was tall and angular. His cadaverous cheeks were host to a bristling gray stubble. His dark, deep-pitted eyes were wary and cunning.

"Your name's Hoppelscoot?" Devoe asked sharply.

"Naturally not." The man's speech was unpleasantly nasal. "But it's a name you'd remember. I figured if I told the woman that, you'd see me." He winked hugely. "Right?"

"Sit down!" Devoe's voice crackled.

The man jumped, then. With a vast show of assurance, he entered the office and seated himself.

Devoe stood up. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"Hold on there now! You're not going to dodge me, eh?"

"I said," repeated Devoe frigidly, "that I'd be back. Wait!" He left the office and closed the door.

In the hallway Devoe moved swiftly. He went to the front door and looked out. One of his riders were sauntering by. Devoe rushed to the edge of the gallery.

"You!" he called guardedly. "Go find Jean Targen and send him here. Hurry!"

The rider started running toward the bunkhouse.

Devoe paced nervously to the far end of the gallery. He rubbed his palms on his coat and peered into the night.

"You wanted me?" Targen's voice spoke almost in Devoe's ear.

The cattleman gasped and whirled. He gripped the pudgy gunman's arm.

"Listen, Jean! There's a man in my office. I want you to have a good look at him when he leaves. If you can hide yourself somewhere in the hall it'll be best."

Targen held up a hand. "Let's go," he said briskly.

Devoe led the way into the hall. He trod heavily to cover the sound of Targen's footsteps. He could have saved himself the effort, for Jean Targen was a man who had mastered the art of silence. When Devoe reached his office door, he glanced back. Targen had vanished.

A hanging coat stirred on the big oak coat-rack opposite him. A soft chuckle came out of the lamp shadow there.

Devoe smiled faintly and nodded. He squared his shoulders and went back into his office. He carefully shut the door.

Devoe's visitor had discovered the whisky. As Devoe came into the office, the fellow eyed him with solemn impudence and put the bottle to his lips. Devoe resumed his seat behind the desk.

The whisky bottle banged down. "Ha!" said the man. He wiped his lips and bent forward. "You know me, Cole?"

Devoe built a steeple with his fingers. "No," he said.

"Think, Cole. Near thirty years ago, before you worked for Jay Porter. The old Yocum gang. You and me and . . . Now d'you know me?"

"Maybe. You must be—'

"Jake Hogan. *Old* Jake Hogan now!"

Devoe nodded pleasantly. "Thirty years is a long time."

JAKE HOGAN scowled. It was evident that he had expected some violent display of emotion on Devoe's part—dismay, or perhaps even fear. Inwardly Devoe smiled. Outwardly he was impassive.

Jake Hogan took another swig of whisky. "Done right well for your-

self, haven't you, Cole?" he said sneeringly.

"I've no complaints."

Hogan grinned and leaned back. Apparently he now had decided to take his cue from Devoe. He waved a hand largely and intimately.

"Got it all from Porter, didn't you? I heard about it after I left these parts, about that and the stage-coach accident. That happened just the day before I left. Sure too bad, wasn't it, Cole?"

"Yes," said Devoe. "It was plumb unfortunate."

"That's where I heard that Hoppelscoot name. I figured you'd remember it."

"Yes," said Devoe. "Anybody would remember that name."

Hogan frowned reflectively. "Cole, what was that nurse gal's name that was working for Porter? The one that identified his kid after they found him below Black-hole Canyon? Wasn't it Minerva Suttler? One of them Injun-wild Suttlers, wasn't she?"

"I believe that was her name."

Hogan grinned again. He reached for the bottle. "Married her, didn't you, Cole? That's what I heard."

Devoe was icily silent. He watched the draining of the bottle.

"Ha! That's good! Best I've had in a long time." Hogan lugubriously shook his head. "I've been in the pen, Cole. Eight mortal years of it, Cole. I've had it terrible rough."

"Yeah?"

"And here you are living off the fat of the land! I even hear you're thinking of running for Congress. I sure hope nothing interferes with your plans, Cole. I sure do, Cole."

"And now," commented Devoe drily, "we're getting down to business. A little blackmail, eh?"

"Blackmail!" Hogan looked pained. "Did I say—"

"Shut up! I know what you're after!" Devoe pointed a finger. "Now listen to me. And listen careful. Jake. If you ever open your mouth about the old Yocum gang to anybody—to anybody, mind you—it's going to be an unlucky day for you. Mighty, mighty unlucky, Jake."

Jake Hogan glowered, then his gaze shifted. "Cole," he protested whiningly, "you don't get me right."

"Oh, yes, I do. I've got you exactly right. You're a sneaking, lying crook, and you always were. But for old times sake I have to give you a hand."

Devoe rose abruptly and went to his little office safe.

"A thousand, Cole, and you'll never see me again," Hogan's nasal voice sounded hopefully behind him.

"You're a liar," Devoe answered promptly. "I know what's on your mind. Right now you get two hundred. Or I might raise that . . . By the by, Jake. Wasn't you married when you left here?"

"You know I was," said Hogan sullenly.

"And you had a child, too, so somebody told me. I s'pose you took your family with you?"

"Yeah, I took 'em both along." Hogan's tone was cautious now. "We went part way to California with a wagon train."

Devoe nodded vaguely. He was busy counting money.

"Two hundred—two fifty," he muttered. "Where's your wife now, Jake?"

"Dead. Fifteen year ago."

Devoe nodded again. "Three hundred," he muttered. "Three hundred and—" He hesitated, and glanced behind him.

Jake Hogan's eyes were craftily narrowed. "Why don't you ask it, Cole?" he inquired gently.

"Ask what?"

"Nothing." Hogan laughed. "Smooth, ain't you, Cole?"

Devoe kicked shut the safe. "Here," he stated coldly, "is three hundred dollars. Now get out."

He strode to the door. From the other side of the door he thought he

detected the faintest rustling of sound.

Hogan slowly stuffed the money into his pocket. His expression was thoughtful. Suddenly, as if becoming aware of Devoe's sharp gaze , he jumped to his feet. He seemed anxious to go now.

Devoe escorted Hogan to the front door. Hogan moved off into the night. His footsteps lagged and his nasal voice carried back through the dark:

"Why didn't you ask that question, Cole? Why didn't you?"

He laughed softly and went on.

FOR a moment Devoe stood as rigid as iron, staring after Jake Hogan. Then he closed the front door and turned. Jean Targen was waiting in the hallway behind him.

Targen had a small parrot mouth, round cherubic eyes and rosy cherubic cheeks that no amount of exposure would tan. His hands were small and graceful. Sometimes, on a bet, he would use his seemingly delicate hands to rip a deck of cards in two. In many respects Jean Targen was a deceptive man in appearance.

Devoe eyed him with some reserve. He suspected that Targen had been listening at the door while he had been talking to Jake Hogan.

Targen's return gaze was ironically amused. "Well," he said, "I had a good look at him. I'll know him again. Want him killed?"

Devoe jumped. "Tarnation!" he cried angrily. "Is that all you think about? Killing somebody?"

"No," replied Targen seriously. "I think of lots of things."

"Did I tell you to kill Monahan?" Devoe persisted, still angry. "Did I ever tell you to kill anybody? Did I"

"Nope. Not in so many words you didn't. You're plumb careful about that." Targen shook his head commiseratingly. "A conscience must be an awful lot of bother."

Devoe glared at the gunman. There were times lately when Targen showed signs of getting out of hand. Perhaps it *would* be a good idea to get rid of him.

"What *do* you want?"

"Nothing!" Devoe answered curtly. "At least"—he frowned and brushed his palm against his coat—"not right now. Later maybe, Jean. If you should happen to run into that man some—"

"Not another word!" Targen held up his hand. "You haven't said a thing, Cole. And I haven't either. Right?"

The two men looked at each other. Targen smiled. Devoe uncomfortably dropped his gaze.

"Right," he muttered weakly. "And —and when you go out, Jean, have somebody saddle Star for me."

Targen nodded. He started to leave.

Ride 'Em, Cowboy!

A rodeo rider named Oney,
Topped a big brahma called Bony,
When he'd finished the ride
A spectator cried:
"Boy! that was a lot of bull—Oney."

by Kid Wells

Devoe cleared his throat. "Jean! Just a minute. Jean, what do you think of Harry Severn?"

"Oh, ho!" Targen raised his eyebrows. "That job will cost you money, Cole."

"There you go again! All I asked you was for your opinion."

"I know what you asked me. And I told you, that job is going to cost you money. *That's* what I think of Harry Severn!"

Devoe turned away. "Don't forget about Star," he said.

Targen left by the front door. A few minutes later Devoe, wearing a hat, left the house by the back door. He found his horse, Star, saddled and waiting at the corral. Devoe climbed aboard.

A horseman came around the corner of the barn and pulled up with some evidence of surprise. Devoe recognized his son, Bob.

VIII

YOUNG Bob Devoe was twenty-one, a larger man than his father, and less finely molded.

"Dad?" he queried, as he recognized the horseman. "Where you going?"

"On business," Devoe replied shortly. "Where've *you* been?"

"Town," said Bob reluctantly. "I . . . Dad, I wonder if you could let me have a little money. I'm flat."

"Money!" exploded Devoe. "That's all I hear from you—money! If you'd stay away from town you wouldn't be so flat. You know what I was doing when I was your age?"

"Yes,' said Bob wearily. "You've told me often enough. You were a twenty-a-month cowboy."

This was not strictly accurate, but Devoe let it pass. Actually, at twenty-one, Devoe had been doing a little high-class rustling with the old Yocum gang.

Bob sighed. "Can't you let me have some, Dad? Not much."

"No!" said Devoe. "Now you get in the house!"

Devoe moved off. His son was a disappointment to Cole Devoe. There was an indecisiveness in Bob's make-up for which Devoe could not account. He himself, he was sure, possessed no such weakness, nor—and this was certainty!—did the boy's mother. Devoe smiled grimly as he thought of his iron-willed wife. Inadvertently he kneed his horse.

The horse, quarter-strain racing stock, bounded forward. With a sort of reckless abandon Devoe loosed the reins. He went roaring through the night, headed for Brinker City.

When Cole Devoe reached town, he avoided Main Street and turned down Plummer Street. Here was a scattering of residences and no business house of any description. It was somber and quiet. Devoe glanced about with an air of furtiveness. The hoofbeats of his horse seemed embarrassingly loud.

Before one of the houses, white-painted and two-story, he dismounted. He led his horse along a short driveway and stabled it in a carriage shed. He went to the back door of the house, tried the knob, knocked, then stabbed a key into the lock. He entered the house and locked the door behind him.

Pushing forward through the darkness, he saw a lamp approaching from the front of the house. The lamp was shielded in the hands of a young Negress. The girl's eyes rolled whitely above the yellow flame.

"That you, Mistah Devoe?" Before Devoe could answer, she had thrown back her head and was shrieking: "Mistah Devoe's here! Mistah Devoe!"

Devoe leaped nervously. "You shut up!" he snarled.

He brushed by the girl and mounted a carpeted stairway, two steps at a time.

At the top of the stairs was a lighted doorway. Devoe passed through and shut the door. He sank down on the edge of a chaise lounge.

The room in which Devoe now

found himself was a bedroom, or as its occupant preferred to call it, a boudoir. There was soft illumination from two rose-shaded lamps, a congestion of furniture and lace-bedecked pillows, a gilded French clock, and the smell of perfume.

The woman in the room, clad in a blue satin kimono, was seated before a pier-glass dressing table which was littered with cosmetic containers of varying shapes and colors, a silver hand mirror and powder box, and a large heart-shaped pincushion. She was rubbing some kind of lotion into her cheeks.

Her name, for formal use, was Mrs. Eugene Cummings. In strict truth, there was not and never had been a Mr. Cummings. Devoe knew her as Fern Kemp.

Fern was fifty years old and proud of her snow-white hair. She also was proud of her juvenile features and smooth, baby-pink complexion. A wrinkle was something to be attacked with ruthless diligence, as she was attacking now. Her figure, striking a happy balance between white hair and baby complexion, was that of a vigorous and lushly rounded young woman.

For a moment after Devoe's unceremonious entrance Fern slowly went on rubbing her cheeks while she looked at him in the pier-glass. Then she wiped off the lotion with a cloth and swung around.

In a low voice Devoe said, "I just saw Jake Hogan."

"What?" Fern bounced erect. "No!"

"Yes," said Devoe. "He was out at the house."

Belatedly he remembered to remove his hat. He flicked dust from the crown and deposited the hat carefully in a waste-basket.

FERN gazed at him searchingly. She crossed the room and sat down beside him. She put her arm around him. At the soft touch Devoe's nerves began to scream. He clenched his hands together.

"Madam," he exclaimed in a dramatic whisper, "the tombs are opening! The past rises about us. The graves give up their dead!"

"Stop it! Get a hold on yourself!" Fern gave him a shake and pushed slightly away from him. "Want a drink?"

"No. I—I don't think so." Devoe straightened and unclasped his hands. He pumped up a smile. "Sorry, Fern."

She nodded. "That's better. Now what did Jake want?"

"Blackmail. That old Yocum gang business."

"What else?"

"Nothing else. Anyway, he didn't mention anything else."

"Do you think he knows? You do, don't you?"

"I don't know what to think, Fern. He left here with his wife and the child. They headed west somewhere. His wife died."

"And?" prompted Fern.

Devoe clasped his hands again. "I don't know," he whispered. "That's all I could get out of him. I—I don't know."

Fern frowned. She tugged at her lower lip.

"He's sly, Fern. I had to be careful. Just a hint is all he'd need. I didn't dare ask too many questions."

"No, of course not." She gestured contemptuously. "That Yocum gang thing is nothing."

"No," said Devoe. "I know that. It's so long ago. A little rustling—what's that? Everybody did it in those days."

"What did you say to Jake?"

"I gave him a few hundred."

'He'll be back again."

"Sure. It's one way of keeping tabs on him."

'Smart," murmured Fern. A hard edge came into her voice. "If he does get troublesome, there's always one way left to get rid of him, isn't there? One *good* way."

"Fern!"

"Might as well say it as think it.

It could be managed easily enough, couldn't it?"

Devoe glanced down at his hands. "Maybe. But I don't like it."

"Then what are you worrying about?"

"Nothing, I reckon." Devoe drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid I'm not myself tonight, Fern. There's been so much today—the trial and then Severn stopped in and . . . Do you know how old Harry Severn is?"

"No," said Fern.

"Twenty-five. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Yes," said Fern. "It suggests that you'd better go home and get to bed. You *are* jumpy!" She patted his hand. "Your hat is in the waste-basket."

Irritably Devoe fished out his hat and jammed it on his head. He stood up, scowled at Fern, then took a packet of money from his pocket. He tossed the money on Fern's lap.

"What's that for?"

"I may not see you for awhile. Minerva comes home tomorrow."

"Oh-h." Her expression was flatly blank. "For how long?"

Devoe compressed his lips and slowly shook his head.

Her gaze moved to the money but she didn't touch it. She smiled faintly.

"You know," she said, "I used to think that was the most important stuff in the world."

"Well?"

"I've been a confidence woman, card sharp and just about everything."

"No need to go into that, Fern."

"Yes, there is. I want to. Six years ago I came here to blackmail you. I was no better than Jake Hogan. Maybe I'm no better now. Maybe I'm just younger. Sounds crazy, don't it, Cole? But it must be true, because money don't seem so important to me now. That *is* being young, isn't it, Cole?"

HE FROWNED uneasily. "I never saw you look like this before, Fern."

"That's because you never saw me so young before. Don't try to understand it, Cole. I'm not sure I understand it myself." Fern arose, and the money fell to the floor. She lifted her arms, and her green eyes were oddly intent. "Good night, Cole."

He reached for her, gripped her hard. "I'm not a bad man, Fern," he said shakily. "Not really bad. But—"

"Good or bad," she murmured. She kissed him and pushed him away.

Devoe settled his coat. The past had retreated and fear was now a vanished wisp of smoke.

"But," he went on harshly, "what I have, I keep! I've had it too long now to give it up without a fight."

"Yes," said Fern gently. "Good or bad—it's all the same. Good night, Cole." She opened the door. "Tess!" she called. "Show Mr. Devoe out."

Devoe left the room. The Negro maid was waiting at the bottom of the stairs with the lamp.

IX

JUST about the time Cole Devoe left Fern Kemp's home, Harry Severn had a visitor. The stocky deputy was in his room at the Brinker City Hotel. He was seated in a chair, his feet propped on his bed, his gaze upon the lamp reflection on the dark window pane. His thoughts were not pleasant. He was thinking of the gaunt, nasal-voiced stranger he had met on the road from Devoe's place.

He was startled by the light knock on the door; he had heard no footsteps in the hall.

"Come in," he said irritably.

The door opened and a man slipped into the room. Severn stared. The man was Jake Hogan. Severn's feet thumped to the floor. His face twisted in cold ferocity. He started to arise. Hogan threw up a warning hand.

"Wait!" he pleaded. "Don't do nothing you'll be . . . Harry! Wait!" His voice climbed frantically.

Severn checked himself. He sat

down again. Quietly enough he said:

"So it was you, after all."

"It's me, Harry. Did I scare you, son?"

"Don't call me that."

"All right. Anything you say, Harry." Hogan sidled forward, perched gingerly on the edge of the bed. "Didn't you know me, Harry, when you seen me on the road? I thought I knowed you, even after all these years. You've sure grown to be a man, Harry!"

"How'd you find me here?"

"Easy. I seen that badge on your coat when we met, so I asked in town who was deputy here and where he was staying. Call yourself 'Severn' now, eh?"

"Yes. I like it better'n Hogan. I'd like any name better'n Hogan."

Hogan sighed. "It ain't easy raising a young one, Harry. Maybe I was a mite harsh on you, but I meant it for the best. And when you pulled out after the old woman croaked, I—"

"Don't call her that!"

"What?"

"I said not to call her that. She was the only mother I ever knew. She saved me from more than one of your drunken beatings."

Hogan shook his head mournfully. "Liquor was my failing, Harry. I tried to be a father to you, but it got the best of me."

"Father!" Severn gave a barking laugh. "You know how hard I'm working to keep my hands off you?"

"Now, now!" Hogan made a quick, pacific gesture. "You ain't holding a grudge *that* long, Harry! This is not much of a welcome."

"You can bet on that! What're you after? Money?"

"No, sir! I just wanted to see you again, Harry."

"A lie, of course. How'd you know I was in these parts?"

"I didn't," replied Hogan earnestly. "So help me, I didn't! I never knowed till I saw you tonight."

"Probably another lie. What're you doing here then?"

"Business, Harry. Just a little business. But now that we've run into each other, it's going to be big business." Hogan winked. "For both of us, Harry."

Severn pointed to the door. "Get out," he said wearily.

"Uh-uh. You got to listen, Harry . . . Now wait! You'd like to know who your pa is, wouldn't you, Harry?"

"What!" Severn gripped the chair. "What'd you say?"

Hogan grinned slyly. "Uh-huh. I figured that'd get you. All right, now listen. You know how you came to me in the first place. Your ma brought you to my cabin one rainy night twenty years ago."

"Her name was Fern Kemp," said Severn in a low voice.

Hogan gave a start. "Who told you that? I never did! Did the old wo—Did Sara tell you?

"That's right. The night before she died."

Hogan scowled. "Just like a woman! She made me promise never to tell. She said it wouldn't do you any good to know that a woman like that was your ma. Oh, well." He shrugged. "That part don't matter. Now, d'you know *why* she left you at my cabin?"

"Yes," said Severn. "She'd shot somebody in a gambling hall. The sheriff was after her, and she couldn't be burdened with me."

"Right—partly right, Harry. But there was another reason she left you with me. It's something the old—that Sara didn't know about. And naturally I didn't tell her. Can't you guess the reason, Harry—the special reason!—why your ma picked *me* out to leave you with?"

SEVERN didn't answer. He gazed at that lank, nasal-voiced, unlovely figure of a man perched on his bed, and he didn't speak.

"Can't you guess why, Harry?"

Suddenly Severn felt the blood

leave his face. "No!" he cried out. "It's a lie!"

"No! It's the gospel truth. I'm your pa, Harry." He came around and patted Severn on the shoulder. Harry—"

"Don't, muttered Severn. He sat slumped and inert.

"I didn't mean nothing, Harry." Hogan stood there with fumbling hands, looking down at the deputy. His cadaverous features twitched in self-pity. "I know I'm not so much, Harry," he said brokenly. "But when a man's own pa comes to him—your *old* pa, Harry—" His voice whined off into silence.

The deputy shuddered. Abruptly he arose. He strode to the center of the room and halted, his back to Hogan. "What is it you want?" he asked hoarsely.

"Nothing much, Harry. I'm not begging. But I've had it terrible rough lately. I'm not well, Harry. If you could find me a place where I could stay awhile and kind of rest up—"

"All right. I'll tell you a place. Take the road toward North Pass—that's the road you met me on this evening. Just as you come to the foothills you'll cross a little creek. About a quarter mile on you'll see a kind of trail—just old wagon tracks—coming in from the left. Follow 'em and you'll find an old shack and barn. You can stay there. No one'll bother you. I own the place."

"Can I get supplies anywheres this late at night?"

"Try Hanley's saloon. He keeps supplies. Need any money?"

"I could sure stand some, Harry. I haven't got a cent."

"Here." Severn held out two gold pieces behind him.

"Thanks, Harry. You're sure good to your old pa. And about that business I spoke of, I guess we can talk that over later. Only one thing, Harry. If I was you, I wouldn't mention anything about me to anybody. Particular about me being your pa." Hogan's voice became subtly anxious. "Right, Harry?"

Severn kept his back turned. He grinned to himself mirthlessly. "Right," he said. "I'm not likely to brag about it. Don't worry."

"Ain't you going to shake hands, Harry?"

"No," said Severn.

He heard Hogan's gusty sigh and then the opening of the door.

"Good night—son."

Severn shuddered again.

The door closed. Hogan's boots scuffed along the hall.

The stiffening went out of Severn's back. He moved slowly to a chair and sat down.

"It's a lie," he muttered. He spoke more loudly, with clenched fist and glaring eye. "A lie! Lie!"

The sound died emptily, without affirmation or denial.

He arose and blew out the lamp. Not bothering to undress, he flung himself upon the bed and crossed an arm over his eyes . . .

Morning came. The sun slid up to the window. For a time Harry Severn squinted drearily, then he arose, washed and shaved. He ate breakfast in the hotel dining room and moved out to the street. The tension of yesterday's court trial was gone. Today the town panted sluggishly in the dust and warming sunlight. Severn's tread echoed solemnly on the wooden walk.

A Negro girl, basket under her arm, came out of Turner's GROCERIES & GENL MDSE and curved a white smile.

"Mawnin', Mistah Sevahn."

"Morning," he replied absently. He stopped. "Tess! Is Mrs. Cummings home?"

"She's always at home. Miz Cummin's ain' the goin' kind." The girl smiled again and rolled her eyes in a way which suggested that she could if she chose, although she never, never would, tell just what kind Mrs. Cummings was. "You want me to give her any message, Mistah Sevahn?"

"No-o. I might drop in to see her myself. Thanks, Tess." Severn nodded brusquely and went on.

A saddler was tied before the false-fronted, one-story County Building. The horse bore Devoe's Boxed D brand. Severn frowned at the horse a moment, then entered the building. He paused with his hand on the knob of the door to the sheriff's office.

INSIDE the office someone was saying, "—don't figure it'll be more'n a day or two we'll have to wait."

"We'll be ready," Sheriff Trimble's voice answered. "I'll ride out today and see Otto Krantz. I'll have him get a half-dozen hoemen together, and I'll deputize 'em in a bunch."

"Then no matter who we rope, the hoemen can't blame us, and Devoe can't blame them. It ought to avoid trouble."

"It's a good idea," said Sheriff Trimble.

"I saw one range war. Devoe's not going to get an excuse to begin one around here—not if I can help it. I don't care if I do work for him. He's not the biggest man on earth. Other folks got rights, even farmers."

"Try explaining that to him," growled the sheriff.

"I did, once or twice. Oh, he's not too bad. Fact is, I think he'd be pretty reasonable, if he hadn't had somebody pushing him all these years. That kind of changes a man."

"I know what you mean," said Sheriff Trimble.

"Well, I'll get word to you when something turns up."

"I'll be ready," said the sheriff.

Severn stepped quickly back from the door and flattened himself against the wall. Devoe's foreman, Ted Gamboy, came out of the office. He left the building without seeing Severn. Severn went into the office.

Sheriff Mark Trimble was seated on a corner of his desk. Unnecessarily and a bit uneasily he said:

"Ted Gamboy was just here."

"Yeah, I know. I heard part of what he was saying."

Trimble looked embarrassed. "Ted thinks there's a little rustling going on. He's been missing a few head."

"Yeah?" Severn set his face blankly. Devoe didn't think so."

"Well, Ted does. Tom Bailey thinks he's lost a few, too."

"Yeah?"

"The idea is," said Trimble, "to get some of the Horse Flats men in the posse along with Gamboy. That way if it turns out to be a Horse Flats man that's doing the rustling, Devoe can't blame all the hoemen."

"I know," interrupted Severn. "I heard that part."

Speaking more slowly, Trimble said, "There's another angle to it. Gamboy don't want you in the posse. He didn't even want—"

"I know." Severn nodded grimly. "He didn't even want me to be told anything about it. Right?"

"Something like that," the sheriff admitted reluctantly.

"He and Tom Bailey think I'm in on the rustling."

"He didn't say that."

"But he thinks it. What do you think, Mark?"

Trimble looked at him steadily. "That's a pretty poor question, Harry. I'm going to give you what you deserve—a good, straight answer! I I didn't like it when Devoe wished you onto me, and I didn't like you. I'm not sure I do yet. But I know you're not a crook—at least, not a two-bit rustling crook. That answer your question?"

"Yeah," said Severn ruefully, "it seems to cover the ground right well. Am I in on your posse then?"

"If you want to be, yes. I'll leave it up to you."

"And if anything goes wrong, I'll get blamed. You will, too."

"Prob'bly. I'm getting used to being blamed."

Severn grinned. "I ought to go along just to rile Gamboy and Tom

Bailey. But I guess I won't." He unpinned his badge and put it on Trimble's desk. "I'm quitting, Mark."

The sheriff picked up the badge and juggled it in his palm. He gazed at Severn from beneath lowered brows.

"Why, Harry?"

"Why?" Severn shrugged. "Because I'm tired of badge-toting, I reckon. You don't like me. Maybe I don't like you. Fair enough?"

X

TRIMBLE'S worried brown eyes continued to rest upon Severn. He stared so long and steadily that Severn began to feel uncomfortable. Then faintly the graying sheriff smiled.

"Fair enough," he agreed, "if you want to put it that way, Harry. But you'll have to wait till the county checks come in for your pay."

"That's all right, Mark. I hear you'll be getting out, too."

"Yes," said the sheriff wryly. "I discovered that I'm growing a little old for the job. What is needed here is a younger, a more aggressive man who can raise ructions. Bah!" Abruptly he turned, opened a desk drawer, and tossed in Severn's badge. "I suppose Devoe told you."

"Yep. He gave me the whole rigamarole."

"I suppose he has somebody else in mind for the job."

"So he said."

"I see," murmured Trimble.

He stood so, one hand on the desk, and his gaze away from Severn. There was a slight slump to his shoulders. Sheriffing, Severn guessed, was about the only thing he knew. He had been at it a good many years. If he wasn't a spectacular law officer, he certainly was a conscientious one.

"But," went on Severn, his voice a bit louder than he intended, "I doubt if Devoe gets the man he has in mind for this job. In fact, I'm pretty sure he won't."

"I see," murmured Trimble again. When he faced Severn, there was that faint smile on his lips. "I find," he said quietly, "I have made a sorry mistake."

"Yeah? What about?"

"About you, Harry. I find now that I'm losing you, that I do like you. Strange, Harry, how we're always finding things out too late."

"Well—" Severn didn't know what to say. He felt his cheeks flushing, and he scowled ferociously. "Well," he growled, "I got to go. Good luck, Mark."

He turned and fled from the office.

Farther down the street, on the opposite side from the County Building, was Sam Teller's Blue Bull Saloon. Severn went that way.

Sam Teller himself was behind the bar when Severn entered. A little later in the day a regular bartender would be on duty, and still later on, Sam Teller would endeavor to start a card game. At present, though, business was slack. Severn saw four customers in the place—two at the bar and two at a rear table.

One of the men at the table called to Severn. The man was Jean Targen. His companion was young Bob Devoe. Severn joined them.

Targen kicked around a chair. "Set down, Harry. Drink?"

"No, thanks."

Severn rested his knuckles on the table and remained standing. He looked at Bob. He was remembering now that Alice had said her brother and the gunman, Jean Targen, were becoming too friendly. It seemed a strange combination.

Cole Devoe's son had blond hair and pleasant features without any particular distinction save that, perhaps, of a too ready smile. He smiled now.

"Mother's coming home today," he said, as if by way of explaining his presence here. "I've got to meet the noon stage." He waved his hand toward Targen. "Jean's got some business of his own."

"That's right," said Targen. "Maybe

you can help me, Harry. When you was coming into town last night did you meet anybody on the road? A tall, hungry-looking jasper with white whiskers."

"Yeah, I saw him," replied Severn.

"Didn't see him around town again this morning, did you?"

"Nope. Looking for him?"

Targen nodded. "In a way. Nothing important. I'll ask in the saloons. If he's still around I'll locate him easy enough."

Severn made no comment. He wondered what the gunman wanted with Jake Hogan. Was he on an errand for Devoe?

He gazed down at the dead man

What kind of an errand?

Targen seemed to have lost interest in Hogan's whereabouts. He was looking at Bobe Devoe. Severn started to leave.

"Harry, wait a minute!" Targen called. "Don't happen to want to sell that place of yours by North Pass, do you?"

"To you? Don't tell me you're going to take up steady work!"

"Hardly." Targen grinned. "It's Bob wants it."

"That's right, Harry. I thought if I could get it cheap enough, I could sort of make a little start for myself."

TARGEN nodded solemnly. "He's got the right idea, Harry. It'll be kind of a weaning pen for him—good experience. One of these days Bob's going to have a lot of responsibility on him."

Severn's thoughts ran swift and linked. Targen and Bob Devoe. His little place by North Pass. North Pass and rustled cattle.

"Well?" said Bob.

"Don't rush the man," said Targen.

"I'll think it over," said Severn. I'll let you know, Bob."

He nodded, turned abruptly and headed for the bar. He could feel Targen's round, deceptively innocent eyes boring into his back.

Sam Teller, neat as always, propped his elbows on the bar and looked at Severn.

"Drink?" he asked.

"No-o." Severn rubbed his chin. "Information," he said softly.

"Well?"

"Bob Devoe. Plays poker here a good deal, don't he?"

Sam laughed. "That's a good one!" he cried. "It reminds me of one I heard yesterday." He leaned forward, tapped Severn on the shoulder and said in a low voice, "Yes. Jean's got his eye on us. He's watching me like a hawk." He laughed again loudly. "How's that one?"

"Loses a good deal, don't he?" murmured Severn.

"Of course," exclaimed Sam. "It's green. It needs curing."

"Where's he get the money? Not from the old man."

"'Course not!" said Sam witheringly. "You being funny? How do I know? But if you want a *good* smoke, try one of these." He produced a box of cigars and opened it. "Ten cents," he said flatly.

Severn selected a cigar and tossed a dime on the bar.

Sam put away the box. "That all, Mr. Severn?"

"All. Thanks." Severn lighted the cigar.

Sam carried a bottle to the two customers at the far end of the bar. He returned to Severn and yawned.

"I hear," he said, "that our friend Martin has left the country. Early this morning. 'Judas Iscariot Martin' they're calling him now."

"I know. Tom Bailey gave him that name."

"Tom Bailey," said Sam in a guarded tone, "had better pull in his horns. He's liable to be shaking hands with poor Monahan before he knows it."

"He can shake hands with the devil for all I care!"

Sam raised his eyebrows. "So?"

"Yes, so! I'm not playing nursemaid for every overgrown lunkhead that thinks he's a hellion on wheels."

"All right, all right," said Sam soothingly. "So you're not playing nursemaid. Did anybody ask you to? I never saw you get so hot under the collar over nothing."

Sam paused, staring at something beyond Severn's shoulder.

"Jean!" said a loud voice. "Jean Targen!"

Then Sam groaned. "Oh, glory, glory! Here we go!"

Severn turned. Tom Bailey had entered the saloon. The big man stood a little to one side of the door, his legs spraddled and his distended hand poised above his holstered gun. With the light from a front window at his back, he made a fine, heroic picture of an amateur gunman. His face was deathly pale.

For a moment after Tom Bailey's melodramatic entrance, the saloon was still. Then there was motion. The two men at the far end of the bar moved first. One of the men fell flat and tried to hide behind a spittoon. His companion nimbly vaulted over the bar and landed resoundingly in a slop bucket. Bob Devoe dived under a table.

"Stop it, Harry!" Sam whispered. "You're the law. Stop 'em!"

Severn dropped his cigar. He eased out his gun.

Jean Targen alone seemed to maintain complete composure. He kept to his chair. His round eyes, fastened upon Tom Bailey, were placidly curious.

Bailey pointed a finger at the pudgy gunfighter.

"Killer!" he cried furiously. "Let's see you do to me what you did to Monahan!"

Targen smiled. "Gentlemen," he said in a pleased voice, "I call you to witness that I'm having this forced on me."

"Oh, no, you're not!" interrupted Severn. "I'll handle this."

Bailey glanced around. "You'll keep out of it!" he snarled.

Severn tilted his gun. "You wiggle a finger, and I shoot your legs from under you."

THE muzzle of a scattergun poked out beside Severn. From a position prudently behind Severn, Sam Teller said:

"And I'm backing up the law. If *any* man moves, I blow his liver out!"

Severn circled behind Bailey. He slid out Bailey's gun and deposited it on the bar.

Sam Teller sighed noisily. "Why," he demanded of Bailey in an aggrieved tone, "do you have to come in here to commit suicide? Why can't you do your dying and bleeding outside? Haven't you got any consideration?"

The pallor of Tom Bailey's cheeks had changed to a dull red. He glared helplessly. He was in the position of a firecracker that has fizzled instead of exploding.

Targen chuckled. "Too bad, Tom. You can try another time. Entertainment's over for now. The law has had its say."

Severn peeled off his coat and laid it on the bar. He put his hat and gun on top of it.

"Wrong, Jean," he said pleasantly. "I'm not the law. I quit this morning. And the entertainment's not over."

He stepped up to Bailey. "You're an ungrateful man, Tom. Here we just saved your life, and you don't thank us. I don't like that. Would you want to take off your hat?"

"What?" Bailey scowled at Severn and clenched his fists.

"I'll take it off for you," said Severn.

He snatched off the hat, slapped Bailey in the face with it, and tossed it on the floor.

"Hey!" yelped Sam. "Damn you, Harry! Go outside if you got to start a ruckus!"

Sam's voice was drowned by Bailey's wild outcry. In a sort of blind frenzy the rancher hurled himself at Severn.

Severn chopped upward between Bailey's flailing arms. The blow had a meaty sound as it straightened Bailey and stopped him. At once Severn hit him again. As Bailey's head tipped back, Severn pivoted and smashed him flush on the jaw.

Bailey was big and tough and he refused to go down. Twice more Severn hit him. Blood showed at the corner of Bailey's mouth. He was reeling and defenseless under the swift attack. He covered his face with his arms and backed away.

Severn stalked him. When Bailey was back to the bar, Severn began swinging open-handed, and the only sound in the place was the rasp of Bailey's breathing and the spat of Severn's palm.

Severn stepped back. "You disappoint me," he said scornfully. "Yesterday, Tom, I thought you were a scrapper."

Bailey lowered his arms. For an instant his eyes were bright above his puffing cheeks. Then his gaze dulled and he groped for support. He started slipping to the floor, his head lolling forward.

Belatedly weary, Severn tried to leap aside. Bailey catapulted himself upward. His head crashed into Severn. Severn's feet flew up and the back of his skull hit the floor.

Severn's ears roared. The ceiling was whirling. Bailey sprang upon him. Clubbed fists ground down on Severn's temples.

Severn clamped an arm around Bailey's neck, strove to turn over and get his knees under him. Bailey battered him with elbows and knuckles. Severn tightened his arm around Bailey's neck, shutting off Bailey's wind. Bailey pressed a red-hot thumb against Severn's eye.

Severn's body curved backward. His heels made an agonized drumming on the floor, but he held his iron squeeze on Bailey's neck. Suddenly the pressure was gone from Severn's eye and Bailey was thrashing to get free.

Severn released him, glad enough to roll away without any further damage. He came to one knee and rested there, tenderly rubbing his eye.

Bailey, on his feet, open-mouthed and gasping, circled slowly. His body tensed and his arms crooked. He rushed at Severn.

Severn threw himself sideward. One of Bailey's pumping knees grazed his jaw, collided terrifically with his shoulder, and Severn was flung over on his back.

Off-balance, Bailey made a half turn and slammed, back on, into the bar. There was a crash of toppling glassware and an agonized wail from Sam Teller. Bailey cried out and his eyes went heedless. Without pause he dived headlong for Severn's prostrate form.

This, Severn knew, was his moment. His legs balled and thrust up mightily to plant his feet in Bailey's midriff.

BAILEY'S heels described a high parabola overhead, and his arms were outflung. He passed over Severn, lazily turning through the air. The impact of his landing jarred the building.

Severn was upon him instantly. He grabbed Bailey's head in both hands and battered it on the floor.

A hand tugged at Severn's shoulder. He looked up into the face of Sam Teller.

"Do you want to kill him?" asked Sam.

Severn brushed Sam aside. In a quick flow of movement he was off Bailey and stooping over. He straightened, and Bailey's inert body came up with him. He swung the man shoulder-high, dropped him and seized his wrist.

As Bailey fell, his rigidly held arm struck Severn's bent knee and made a dull, cracking noise. Bailey thudded to the floor and lay huddled and motionless.

XI

FOR brief moments there was stillness in the saloon. The fight had attracted an audience, for a half-dozen men formed a compact group by the opened door. They gazed at Severn with sullen, disapproving eyes. Then, behind Severn, Sam Teller said:

"The man was licked, and you had to do that, after he was out cold."

"He didn't feel it, did he? Can you think of a better time to do it?" Severn's voice was harshly defiant. He went to the bar, slipped his gun into its holster, and put on his hat and coat.

"All right, fellers," said Sam Teller briskly. "We got to get Tom to the doc's. Careful of that arm."

Severn watched in the back-bar mirror as four men lifted the unconscious Tom Bailey and carried him out.

Jean Targen was still seated at his table. His gaze, as it met Severn's in the mirror was brooding and mournful.

"Harry," he murmured, "I'll not forgive you for that. Couldn't you have made it his other arm?"

"No," answered Severn.

He left the saloon and plodded across the sunlit street. He had not gone far when a voice hailed him.

"Harry!" Peg Teller was standing on her front porch. She indicated the open door behind her. "Get in here!" she ordered grimly.

Severn hesitated, then shrugged and turned toward her. He preceded her through the house to the kitchen. She pulled out a chair.

"Sit down!" she said.

Severn sat down. He took off his hat.

Peg poured warm water from a teakettle into a basin. She was smaller than Alice Devoe, and dark where Alice was fair. There was a tranquil surety in all Peg's motions which Alice lacked.

Severn scowled slightly. Why, he wondered, was he making this comparison? Alice was Alice, and Peg—well, Peg was folks. You could talk with Peg like a man, sometimes. And other times you were uneasily aware that Peg most certainly was not a man.

Severn willed his mind into a comfortable blankness. He waited for the inevitable questions, but Peg was silent. That was another thing about Peg—she knew when to ask questions and, what was much more important, she knew when not to. Puzzle: Why, when he blanked his mind, did Peg always take possession?

"I had a little trouble," he said lamely.

"So I see." Peg was dabbling a clean white rag in the basin of water. "Tilt your head back," she commanded.

Severn tilted his head back. "It was Tom Bailey," he said.

"Yes," replied Peg. "I know. I saw them carry him out."

She gently mopped his face with the wet rag. Her wide dark eyes were so close that Harry Severn had the sensation of falling right into them. Peg frowned and swiped the rag across his nose with sudden roughness.

"Sit quiet!" she said angrily.

Severn closed his eyes and sat quiet. He still had that pleasurable falling sensation.

The front door opened and shut. Peg stepped back, and Severn looked around. Sam Teller came into the kitchen. He pointed at Severn and spoke to his daughter.

"Did he tell you what happened?"

"Not yet he hasn't."

"Fine," said Sam. "Then I'll tell you. Jean Targen was over at the place. Tom Bailey walked in all primed to shoot it out with Jean over that Monahan business. Harry here pulled a gun and stopped it. Then, when everything was calmed down, Harry walked up to Tom and slapped him in the face. He started the fight and finished it—got Tom down and banged his head on the floor till Tom was out cold. And then—" Sam paused.

Peg set down the basin. "Go on," she said impatiently.

"And then," said Sam, "when Tom was licked, when he was out cold, Harry grabbed Tom's arm and broke it across his knee. What's your opinion of a feller like that, Peg?"

Severn reached for his hat. "All right, Sam," he said thickly, "I'll get out."

"You," said Sam in a stern aside, "will stay put and keep shut! Well, what you think of him, Peg?"

Slowly Peg said, "Which arm was it, Sam?"

"That's it!" Sam nodded soberly. "You've guessed it, Peg. It was his right arm. I was dumb at first. I couldn't figure why Harry would do such a thing. Jean got it right off, though. He was pretty sad. He'd counted on hanging up Tom's scalp. Well, I'm going."

THE gambler turned to leave. He glanced back at Severn.

"Who was it, Harry," he asked gently, "that said something about not playing nursemaid to big Tom Bailey? It wasn't you who said that, was it?"

He laughed jeeringly and went out.

Peg had emptied the basin and was refilling it. She set it on the painted chest beneath the wall mirror.

"Here," she said. "You can do the rest of your washing yourself."

Severn washed. He smoothed down his hair. He examined himself in the mirror. His face wasn't too bad. A few light cuts and some bruises. His eyes were bloodshot, but he could see well enough.

He saw Peg watching him in the mirror. Instantly she scowled.

"I suppose now you want coffee," she said.

"Well . . . That's all, though. I'm not hungry."

"I shouldn't think you would be. A pretty object you are!"

Peg opened the stove and viciously heaved in a couple of chunks of wood. She banged the coffee pot, keeping her back to Severn.

Severn sat down at the kitchen table, sprawled his legs, and half-closed his eyes. For the moment he was completely relaxed. His gaze followed Peg with drowsy interest, noting the tilt of her head, the curve of her cheek, the soft swing of her body beneath the crisply starched house-dress as she turned the handle of the coffee grinder.

Her movements became slower—ceased.

She spoke with her head bent over, her voice muffled.

"It's true, isn't it, Harry?"

"What?"

"You broke Tom's arm so he wouldn't try to gunfight Jean."

"Well—"

"I think that's why, but I want you to tell me yourself."

Severn hesitated, then nodded. "That's why, Peg."

"You don't like Tom Bailey, do you?"

"No!"

"Then why'd you do it? You could have stopped the fight today and let it go at that, couldn't you? It's none of your business if Tom wants to tackle Jean again some time, is it?"

"No-o." Severn gestured helpless-

ly. "I don't know why I did it, Peg. I just got soft-headed, I guess. I . . . Well, I did it."

"Alice Devoe used to like Tom. Maybe she still does."

"So what?"

"You know what. It's like loaning a man money in a poker game. He'll turn around and break you every time."

"All right, then he'll break me. I told you I was soft-headed. No use rubbing it in."

"I'm not rubbing it in. I'm just trying to make you see what a big fraud tough Harry Severn is."

"I'm not a fraud!"

"Oh, yes you are, pardner. By the way, you know what people will say about you, don't you? They'll say it was a dirty, cowardly trick to break Tom's arm after he was helpless."

Severn scowled. "I wouldn't want you to think that, Peg."

"You know I don't."

"Then," said Severn with finality, "I don't care what anybody else thinks. Let 'em say what they please."

"Yes," said Peg. "Let 'em!"

There was a strange lilt in her voice; and she gave the coffee grinder a whirl that made it dance.

The coffee hit the spot. Severn discovered that he was hungry after all. Peg peeled him three hard-boiled eggs. He topped off the eggs with bread and jelly.

"I didn't get that jelly quite stiff enough," said Peg hopefully. "And that bread's not as good as my bread generally is."

"It's not too bad," Severn responded consolingly.

Peg sighed. She poured him a second cup of coffee and took a cupful herself. She sat down across the table from him.

Severn rolled a cigarette. "I quit my lawing job," he said.

"No! When, Harry?"

"This morning."

"Why?" She glanced at him searchingly. "Another one of those things you don't know why you did?"

"Maybe." Severn lighted his cigarette. "Let's forget it."

"What're you going to do now?"

"I reckon I'll go out on that place of mine."

"How nice! Right close to the Devoes. Have you told Alice the glad news yet?"

"Not yet. Cut it out, Peg! You don't hear me passing remarks on Bob Devoe, do you?"

"Of course not! Why should you?" Peg looked brightly astonished. "You certainly haven't anything against Bob, have you?"

"No!" said Severn savagely.

STEADILY they gazed at each other. Peg smiled a twisted smile.

"Pretty looking pair, aren't we, Harry? Like those eggs—been under water too long."

"Well—"

Peg raised her coffee cup. "A toast, Harry. To Alice and Bob and their papa's barrelful of money! Most particularly to the money! Drink 'er down! Drink hearty, pardner!"

Severn eyed the girl warily. He gulped his coffee.

There was a thud and a splash as Peg's cup landed on the floor.

"I dropped it, pardner." Her laugh was brittle.

Severn frowned. "Look, Peg! Be serious. I want to tell you something. You know I don't know who my father or mother was."

"Well?"

"Supposing I told you I do know. Supposing I told you my father was a mean, sneaking crook and that my mother was—well, was just about as bad as a woman could be."

"Well?"

"I mean," Severn, with some exasperation, "what's a man to do in a case like that?"

"You might try hiding in a monastery."

Severn stood up and jammed on his hat. "I reckon you're right, Peg," he

said in a weary tone. "You have been under water too long. Nothing much matters to you."

"Unimportant things don't. Important things do."

"I know. Important things like money."

She smiled her twisted smile. "Sometimes," she said quietly, "I think I could kill you, Harry, with pleasure."

"And sometimes," retorted Severn grimly, "you make me so mad that I could reach out and—and—"

"And what, Harry?"

"Nothing. I'm going. Thanks for the feed."

"You'd better go! Any man as blind and dumb as you are!" Suddenly the girl sprang to her feet. Her eyes were furious. Her lower lips trembled. "Get out of here!" she cried, her voice nearly a scream. "Right away, before I throw something! Get out!"

Severn left the kitchen in a hurry. He halted by the front door.

"Peg!" he called back pacifically.

The house was quiet. Then from the kitchen came a slight hiccough. Almost it sounded like a suppressed sob.

Severn went out, scratching his head. He felt that in some way he had acted shabbily, but he wasn't sure how. Peg, he guessed, was having one of her moody days.

XII

NOW the stage had come in. As Severn plodded along the plank walk, Cole Devoe's new buggy flashed smartly by. Devoe was driving and beside him, stiff as one of Peg's starched dresses, her strong aquiline nose jutting proudly, sat Mrs. Devoe, newly arrived home from one of her frequent Eastern visits. She glanced briefly at Severn with her cold, haughty eyes, and favored him with the suspicion of a nod.

Behind the buggy came a buckboard, driven by one of the ranch hands and carrying trunks, bags and hat boxes. On horseback and following the buckboard was young Bob Devoe. The procession swept out of town and was gone in a dust haze.

Ahead of Severn, lounging on the walk, was Jean Targen.

Severn turned off Main Street, cut through a vacant lot and emerged on Plummer Street. His stride lengthened. Each footfall was heavy and deliberate. His countenance was gloomy, his whole aspect that of a man resolutely prepared to take a cold plunge. He went up to a house, white-painted and two-story, and pulled the bell.

Tess, Mrs. Cummings' maid, opened the door. She showed her magnificent white teeth.

"Come in, Mistah Sevahn. Mis Cummin's is expectin' yo'."

Severn removed his hat and entered the house. He glanced back and saw Jean Targen sauntering around the corner a block away.

Tess closed the door. She ushered Severn into a living room.

Mrs. Eugene Cummings, her white hair piled high, was seated on a horsehair sofa with a book in her lap. She was wearing a purple wrap with flowing sleeves, and a feather neck-piece. Severn had only a slight acquaintance with her and he was embarrassed. In his experience most women were fully clothed by this time of day.

She waved her hand cheerfully. "Sit down, Harry. Tess told me you wanted to see me. After donations for something?"

"Not exactly."

Severn sat on the edge of a chair. He stared grimly at this white-haired woman who had such amazingly young features and body and who was —so it was rumored—a very good friend indeed of Cole Devoe.

At once, sharply, she said, "That's all, Tess. Shut the door."

Tess left. She slammed the room door.

"It's about me that I want to see

you," said Severn.

"You?" She frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will. It's about you, too. About both of us."

"Oh-h." She laid aside the book.

Severn looked down at the floor. "You know," he said in a low voice, "or maybe you don't, that I was raised by a foster father. At least, I thought he was only my foster father. His name was Jake Hogan."

There was a faint gasp from the woman.

"My mother," went on Severn, "abandoned me to Jake Hogan when I was a baby. She was running from the law at the time." He drew a long breath. "Her name," he said, "was Fern Kemp."

There was complete silence in the room. Severn slowly lifted his gaze. The woman was waxen pale. Rigid creases showed by her mouth.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"That you are Fern Kemp? I never was absolutely sure till now. I traced you—it took a good many years. Finally, three years ago, the trail brought me here."

Color returned to the woman's cheeks. "You've been here three years," she murmured. "Has it taken you all this time to guess I am Fern Kemp?"

"No," replied Severn. "I guessed it a long time ago. But—"

"I understand. It was better only to suspect the worst than to know it." She smiled sadly. "That was it, wasn't it, Harry?"

Severn didn't answer. He gazed down at his hands. He heard her arise from the sofa, heard her quick pacing movements. She came close and halted. He could smell her perfume, could see the tips of her ridiculous, wine-red embroidered slippers with scarlet pom-poms.

This woman, he thought, is my mother.

Her voice ran out softly to him. "It's a shock to be suddenly confronted with a grown son. I don't . . . Shall we have a drink?"

"No. I don't think I . . . Well, I don't want one. Thanks."

"Ah, I've made a mistake already! I forget that though women sometimes drink, a man's mother never does. Forgive me, Harry."

THE wine-red slippers retreated. He heard her sit down on the sofa. Her tone was calm now, conversational.

"What made you decide to come here today, Harry? Something must have."

"Yes. It was Jake Hogan. He's here."

"Oh-h. He's here? You saw him? Talked to him?"

"Yes," said Severn. "Last night. He told me something that it's mighty hard to believe." He gripped his knees and bent forward, staring at the woman. "One question—" he cried hoarsely. "Who was my father?"

"I expected that." She shook her head and tightened her lips. "That's something you'll never know, Harry. It's a secret" — dramatically she touched her chest—"locked in here."

"You forget," said Severn, "that I talked to Jake Hogan last night. He says *he* is my father."

"What? Oh, my heavens!" She clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Did he lie? Or didn't he? I've got to know, and I'm going to know." Severn stood up. "The truth!" he said sternly. "I have a right to know. Is Jake Hogan my father?"

"Now wait!" She leaned back against the sofa and made a weak motion of protest. "I must think, Harry."

"No," said Severn in an implacable tone. "You know. You don't need to think. Is Jake Hogan my father?"

"Yes," she whispered. "He's . . . Let me tell you how I—"

"Not now," said Severn drearily. "You can tell me later."

"Yes, later." Fern Kemp spoke

without moving her lips. Her green eyes were dilated. She sat as still as a plaster image.

Severn inclined his head gravely to her. He turned and left.

For an instant he paused on the porch, the closed door behind him, his eyes squinting against the sun glare.

"Mother," he said tentatively under his breath. "Father."

He was thinking, A red bull for red calves. And a blackguard for blackguards. My old man.

He laughed again, but there was no mirth in the sound. His dark tough features were lowering; his thick shoulders swung with his heavy stride. At this moment Harry Severn was a dangerous-looking. He looked like a man who might be capable of anything. . . .

The next day Harry Severn gave up his room at the Brinker City Hotel. Shortly after noon he crossed the shallows of Tinicum Creek on North Pass road and turned his horse left on a narrow trail that wound along the brush slopes of the foothills. The trail came out at the head of a lean basin of grassland.

Close by, shadowed by a huge and solitary bullpine, was a small corral with a barreled spring at one corner. A bony, saddle-galled horse blinked listlessly at Severn from behind the corral poles. Adjoining the corral was a jerry-built barn. Beyond was an unpainted, weathered shack.

Severn unsaddled his own horse and turned it into the corral, tossed in hay from the small store in the barn. He shouldered his warbag and blanket-roll and headed for the shack.

The shack door was open, and green-bodied flies buzzed importantly in and out. Overhead, as Severn crossed the threshold, he heard the hard thump of a wood rat. From the far end of the shack came a horrid, strangling, gurgling sound. The gurgling sound was repeated. It issued from the gaping mouth of Jake Hogan.

Jake was sprawled on his back on a mess of dirty blankets in one of the shack's two built-in bunks. His eyes were closed and a long arm, dangling over the bunk side, rested protectingly upon an empty whisky bottle. His chest heaved as he gasped and gurgled and growled.

Severn gave the snoring man a contemptuous stare and dropped his own belongings on the second bunk. He found a twig broom left by the former occupant of the shack and began a vigorous cleaning out of rat litter, dust and refuse. He gave the bottle by Jake's dangling hand an angry fling through the doorway.

His exploring broom dragged out another whisky bottle from under Jake's bunk. This bottle was full. Severn started to fling it after its companion, then changed his mind. He replaced the bottle under the bunk.

SEVERN finished his cleaning chores, sat down on a box, cocked his feet on a window sill and gave himself up to scowling reflection. Jake Hogan continued his snoring. Finally, in exasperation, Severn kicked the side of the bunk.

"Shut up!" he roared.

Jake reared up. "Who? Wha's matter? What!" He peered blearly. "Oh, it's you! Morning, son."

"It's afternoon," said Severn coldly. "Go wash your face."

Jake fumbled under the bunk and brought out the bottle. He took a long swig.

"Liquor's my failing, son."

"For my money you're better company drunk than sober. Go wash."

Jake stuck the bottle in his coat pocket and came to his feet. As he started for the door, surprisingly he didn't stagger. He got as far as the door and halted, frowning and rubbing his whiskery cheeks. He looked back with an expression of cunning.

"Say," he demanded. "What's going on at this place?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Who's running night cattle through here?"

"You're drunk!"

"Sure I'm drunk. But I know what I saw. Last night a couple fellows came hustling through here with about twenty head of cattle. Went by not a hundred yards from the shack, right over there."

"Did they see you?"

"'Course not! I ain't that dumb—not old Jake Hogan!" He twisted his face in a prodigious wink. "You got a smart old man, Harry. Stick to old Jake Hogan, Harry, and one of these days we're going to be rolling in clover. We'll have Cole Devoe crawling to us on his hands and knees."

"Go wash yourself," Severn repeated. "Your hands, too!"

Jake gave a martyred sigh. He left the shack.

Severn smoked a cigarette, then he, too, went out. A short distance from the shack he came upon bunched cattle tracks. The tracks seemed to be heading directly for the notch of North Pass.

Severn sauntered to the corral and saddled his horse. Jake was reclining in the shade of the big bullpine. He lifted his frowsy head.

"You going somewheres, Harry?"

"No," said Severn. He climbed into saddle.

"Listen, son. Bring me back another bottle. I hardly—"

Severn rode off.

XIII

UNTIL Severn was out of sight of the shack, he followed the old wagon trail toward North Pass road. Then he left the trail and began to buck the brush uphill. Fifteen minutes later he found the bunched cattle tracks again.

The sign was not difficult to read—cattle tracks occasionally overlaid by hoof prints of a horse. Twenty to thirty head of cattle, so Severn judged, had been choused along by two riders.

After a zigzag climbing course through brush and timber, the tracks ended in the shallow, gravel-bottomed headwaters of Tinicum Creek. Severn rode into the water and turned his horse upstream.

This higher land was becoming rugged. Rock walls reared up on either side of the creek. For a time Severn splashed along in cool, damp shadow. Then the rock walls fell away, and on the lowering embankment cattle tracks abruptly reappeared.

The tracks continued to climb toward North Pass. An alert wariness now marked Severn's progress. He dismounted and led his horse. The going was steadily rougher and steeper. Slide gouges showed in the cattle tracks. Ahead of him Severn could see the clear sky between the dark tree trunks.

Severn left the trail. He tied his horse and made a crouching advance. Suddenly he came out on the rim of a sort of pothole, a circular depression perhaps a quarter of a mile across and a couple hundred feet in depth. To his left he saw the descending prints of the cattle he was trailing. On the far side of the pothole he saw the cattle—he counted twenty-three—held by a crude brush corral.

Severn found a comfortable hiding place in the undergrowth and settled himself to wait. The sun dropped toward the west and long pools of shade lay across this high land. Severn sighed gently and stretched. Then he suddenly tensed, drew out his gun.

Someone was approaching. There was the thud of hooves and the creak of saddle leather.

The rider made his appearance only a few feet from Severn. He sat his saddle peering down at the cattle with a mingled expression of petulance and anxiety. The man was young Bob Devoe.

All at once Bob's glance brightened. He snatched off his hat and waved it. Severn saw an answering motion from

the opposite rim of the pothole. Two riders showed there.

After waving to Bob, the two riders urged their horses down a narrow trail that led to the bush corral. Bob turned to go.

"Wait, Bob," Severn said softly.

Bob gasped, whirled to look into Severn's gun.

"You'd better know," said Severn. "Whose cattle are those and who brought 'em up here last night? And before you answer, I'll tell you something. I was in my shack last night when they went by."

Bob seemed on the point of collapse. His mouth opened and shut. He licked his lips.

RANGE RAMBLINGS

THE CUSTOM of measuring horses in hands rather than inches dates back to pioneer days when horse dealers were generally lacking in rulers or yardsticks.

ARIZONA'S PAINTED DESERT was once the delta of a large river, perhaps even greater than the Mississippi, some millions of years ago.

NED W. FROST, a pioneer of Cody, Wyoming, a great hunter whose kill of buffalo, bear, deer, wolves, mountain lions, etc., ran into the tens of thousands during his 65 years of shooting, killed his first elk alone at the age of 7 and got his first grizzly bear when only 8.

BUFFALO BILL, at the age of 15, once made a ride of 384 miles with the Pony Express, stopping only to change horses.

By HAROLD HELFER

"Come here!" ordered Severn. "Get down here out of sight."

Bob dragged himself forward. He sank down in the undergrowth beside Severn. He had grown paper-pale, and was panting.

"Scared, eh?" Severn nodded grimly. "You ought to be! Who's those fellows you just waved to?"

"I—I don't know. I just saw 'em and waved."

"You—you saw us, Harry?"

"That's right," lied Severn. "Both you and Jean Targen. I know now why you wanted to buy my place. It was so you could rustle your old man's cows through there. They are your old man's cows, ain't they?"

Bob nodded weakly. "Mostly, Harry. Let me explain."

"Never mind," said Severn contemptuously. "I know the answers.

Your old man don't give you enough poker money so you get it by stealing his cows. Nice business!"

Bob dropped his gaze. "I reckon I'm not much account, am I, Harry?" he said drearily.

"Not much. Still, as long as you admit it, you can't be too bad. How'd you work it? You bring the stock up here and those two fellows you waved to take over. That the setup?"

BOB nodded again. "They drive 'em up through the Pass. I don't think they do any brand changing. They butcher 'em and sell 'em to a railroad camp on the other side of the Pass. They got a contract."

"Who are they?"

"Jack and Jill." Bob shook his head. "You don't know 'em, and I ain't going to tell you. I'm not that bad, Harry. I may be a crook, but I'm not a squealer."

Severn put away his gun. His gaze softened somewhat.

"Who got you into this?" he asked. "Jean Targen?"

"No!" said Bob sullenly. "I got both of us into it. I needed help, so I asked Jean. I'm not putting the blame on anybody!"

"Why'd you come back here now?"

"To see if the cattle were still here. I wasn't sure if—" Bob jumped. "What's that?"

A gun banged. Someone shouted. More guns went off.

Severn smiled thinly. "I think," he said, "that Jack and Jill are falling downhill." He raised to his knees and peered cautiously through the brush.

The bottom of the pothole was a scene of violent turmoil. The two riders who had waved to Bob Devoe had arrived at the brush corral where the cattle were. Now, apparently, they were eager to leave again. Both had their guns out and were riding furiously toward the trail they had taken down there. From a point almost directly below Severn, and invisible to him, came a series of shots.

"Halt!" a stentorian voice bellowed. "Stop!"

One of the riders answered with a mocking whoop. He fired back over his horse's rump.

"A trap!" cried Bob. He sprang wildly to his feet. "I've got to help them!"

"Shut up!" said Severn harshly. He jerked Bob down. "Watch!" he said. He gripped Bob by the nape of the neck.

The two fleeing riders had reached the foot of the trail. One of the men left his horse. He executed a loose dive and landed headfirst on a rock pile. He lay quiet.

"One," said Severn. He dug his fingers deeper into Bob's neck. "Watch," he repeated. "Rustlers. See what happens?"

The second rider kept on going. He spurred his horse cruelly. The horse humped itself up the trail. Gunfire had ceased. As he reached the far rim of the pothole, the rustler turned and lifted his hand in a gesture of defiance.

There was a volley of shots, and the rustler toppled from the saddle. He slid back down the trail, rolling and disjointed like a man of rags.

"Dead," muttered Severn. "Both of 'em. The price of twenty-three cows." He released his hold on Bob. "You saw it," he said. "Now what d'you think of rustling? Fun, eh?"

Bob shuddered, but didn't answer.

Several men carrying rifles appeared from some point below Severn who recognized Tom Gamboy, the tall figure of the sheriff, and the black-bearded Otto Krantz. The others, he guessed, were hoemen from Horse Flats. They crossed the bottom of the pothole, examined the two rustlers, then stood about, talking and reloading their rifles.

Otto Krantz was looking up at the rim of the pothole where Severn and Bob were hidden. He said something to Sheriff Trimble and pointed. Trimble nodded and called to the rest of

the men. Immediately the whole posse began running back across the pothole.

Severn knew exactly what had happened. Otto Krantz had seen the two rustlers wave to Bob Devoe just before they had descended the trail into the pothole. Krantz suspected that someone was up here.

Severn grabbed Bob's arm. "How many ways out of this place?" he demanded fiercely.

"Two. You can go around and cut across the creek upstream to—"

"No good!" Severn shook his head decisively. "I didn't see their tracks, so that's the way the posse must have come. If we go that way, we'll run right into 'em. And the only other way is down that little canyon where you drove up the canyon. Right?"

"That's all. There's cliffs all around here back of the trees. I guess we could climb out on foot."

"And let them find our horses? Uh-uh! We'll have to chance the canyon. Come on now! Hurry! They'll be after us."

THE two backed out of the undergrowth. Bob's horse was near. Severn ran to his own horse and swung into saddle. Bob, mounted, drew up beside him. They jolted and slid down the trail and into the shallow creek. They splashed through the canyon.

As they left the canyon, there was a distant yell. The echo of a rifle shot bounced along the damp rock walls behind them.

Severn swerved his horse out of the creek, and Bob followed him. They bucked the brush and scrub timber downhill toward the valley rangeland. Severn kept a fairly straight course, angling away from Tinicum Creek and North Pass road.

"Where we going?" yelled Bob.

Severn shook his head and glanced at the sky.

The sun was gone and distant objects were becoming hazy. Severn slowed his horse and studied the back trail. He saw no sign of pursuit.

"Maybe they've given up," said Bob hopefully. "Maybe we ought to swing back to the road."

"No," said Severn. "That's just what they'll be watching for. And they haven't given up. Not Trimble and Krantz."

"They can track us here. I hear Trimble's good at that."

"He is. We'll give him something to work on."

They went on, riding sidehill now instead of downhill. They made the turn around a long hogback and before them was a steep talus slope. Beyond and below was the mouth of Squaw Gorge, an area of shale rock and sandstone, narrow washes and strewn boulders.

Severn led the way down the talus slope, the two horses slipping and scrambling. They arrived at the bottom in a dusty slide of loose rubble. Severn pushed on up a winding gully, then crossed the hard ground to another, where he called a halt.

XIV

HERE in this barren bottomland, night came swiftly, filling the hollows like a rising tide. Severn and Bob sat quiet and listening, but they heard nothing but the breathing of their horses.

Severn dismounted. "We'll wait awhile," he said.

Bob swung to the ground. He gave a light, nervous laugh. "I guess they can't track us here. Not even Trimble."

"No," said Severn. "Not tonight anyway."

"D'you think they saw us? I mean enough to recognize us?"

"I don't think so. I hope not."

Bob repeated his light laugh. "And I guess," he said shakily, "that you're not going to turn me in about that rustling, not after you've taken all this trouble. You're not, are you?"

"No," said Severn.

"And you think those other two, the two they shot, are dead?"

"Yes," said Severn. "They're dead. They won't do any talking. And you can be sure Jean Targen won't."

Bob sat down. "This is going to be a lesson to me, Harry," he said weakly. "I'll never do another crooked thing as long as I live."

Severn leaned against a boulder.

"I did you a favor last night, Harry," Bob said softly, placatingly. Alice was mad at you for breaking Tom Bailey's arm."

"Well?"

"I told her why you did it. Jean thinks you did it to keep Tom from trying to gunfight him. That's why, wasn't it, Harry?"

"Maybe." Severn shrugged. He was amazed to find that Alice's opinion on the matter was of no great importance to him.

Bob was moodily silent. After awhile he stood up. He peered into the gloom.

"Will we have to stay here all night?" he asked.

"No," replied Severn. "Just until it's a little darker."

Twenty minutes later they climbed into their saddles.

"If anybody tries to stop us," instructed Severn, "don't run. Stop, and let me do the talking. We've been together all afternoon. We've been looking for rustlers. That's our story."

They moved at a walk down the black course of Squaw Gorge. The ring of hooves on the rocks was uncomfortably loud. The sound got on Severn's nerves. He wished he was well out of this mess. He had, he knew dismally, acted again like a soft-headed idiot. It was no affair of his if Bob Devoe wanted to get strung up for rustling.

"Harry?"

"Well?" Severn said irritably.

"I've just been thinking! If we'd been caught, Trimble and the rest might have thought you were a rustler, too."

"It's a possibility," Severn conceded drily.

"Why're you doing it, Harry—helping me like this? On account of Alice? Because I'm her brother?"

"I suppose so."

Suddenly Severn was angry with himself. He knew quite well why he had done this crazy thing tonight. It wasn't because of Alice at all. It was because of Peg Teller. If Peg was silly enough to want this young weakling then, he, Harry Severn, would see that he was delivered undamaged, right side up and with care. It was, he thought sourly, a nice token of friendship. To Peg from Harry. Happy days, pardner.

The two men emerged from the gorge. Before them was the somber, starlit rangeland, ink-patterned where the knolls and brush patches were. The ring of hooves changed to a quiet thudding. Severn swung his head warily. He didn't like the tight stillness, the long impenetrable shadows.

"Shtop!" the bull voice of Otto Krantz roared out of the dark.

Severn halted. "Stand still!" he ordered Bob.

He was too late. Horse and man had bolted.

Instantly, from a splotch of blackness on Severn's right, came a burst of rifle fire. Severn felt a slicing pain along his ribs. His horse reared, and Severn clutched at the saddle-horn. The horse bounded forward, racing after the fleeing Bob Devoe.

Severn let his horse run and clung to the horn with both hands. The rifle fire continued briskly for a minute, then stopped. There was no sound in Severn's ears save the rush of the night wind and the gathering drum of hooves beneath him. Dimly he could see Bob Devoe tearing along ahead of him.

BOB was pulling in his horse. He dropped back closer to Severn.

"Sorry, Harry," he called contrite-

ly. "I—I forgot. I jabbed with my spurs before I remembered what you'd told me."

"Keep going!" Severn cried savagely. "We've *got* to keep going now!"

He glanced behind him. Briefly, as it swept over the crest of a rise, he saw the bobbing silhouette figures of a body of horsemen.

"They'll never catch us. Follow me, Harry!"

There was a quick surge of excitement in Bob's voice. He was a good rider on an excellent horse. He knew every slope and gully in this hillside land.

Severn followed. He clenched his teeth and concentrated all his faculties upon staying in saddle. The shock of that sudden pain along his ribs had left him as weak as a child.

There was a splash and a leap as his horse crossed a creek; Tinicum Creek again, Severn supposed. For a short time the two fleeing men held to North Pass road. Then Bob left the road and at a slower pace he led the way among brush clumps and around hillocks until Severn had lost all sense of direction. The horses picked up speed on a long downgrade that grew steeper and steeper. Severn jolted from side to side, half in saddle, half out of it.

Bob waved his hand. "We've lost them!" he cried triumphantly. "Watch it here, Harry. Hang on!"

Severn saw Bob's horse make a high, stretching jump. He tried to lift with his knees as his own horse gathered itself and jumped. Beneath him he glimpsed the black line of a narrow gully. His horse landed jarringly on the far side of the gully, and Severn was shaken from saddle. He sailed through the air and struck on his head.

There was a gray fog of semiconsciousness in which incoherent thought wisps swirled like phantoms. There was an interminably prolonged kneading of his stomach that made him sick. Then the kneading stopped and someone was saying:

"Walk, Harry, walk! Can't you walk?"

"Sure I can walk."

Was that his own voice answering? It must have been, for he was wading through the gray fog. He was walking. . . .

Harry Severn held his head and groaned. He opened his eyes cautiously and blinked at the lamplight. He looked about. He was in a bedroom, seated on the edge of a bed. His hat and coat and shirt were lying on a nearby chair.

The door opened, and Bob Devoe came into the room carrying a basin of water and a folded sheet.

"What happened?" muttered Severn. "Where are we?"

"Don't you know? I brought you home. This is my room." Young Bob grinned. "I thought you was talking queer. You've been sort of out of your head ever since it happened. You remember falling off your horse, don't you?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

Severn put his hand to the top of his head. A sore swelling had sprung up there. Bob knelt beside him. He started washing dried blood from a two-inch furrow across Severn's ribs.

"I wondered why you fell off so easy," Bob said soberly. "I didn't know about this till I got you here and saw the blood on your shirt. Close! Just a little more, and you'd of got it."

"The posse!" exclaimed Severn with sudden alertness.

"We lost them. After you fell off, I just loaded you across your saddle like a sack of meal and brought you in. You got sick once."

Severn nodded. "I remember that, too. What'd you do about our horses? If Gamboy finds them, he'll know they've been running."

"He won't find them. I turned them loose. Your saddle is hid back of the grain bin in the barn."

Bob put down the basin. He opened

the folded sheet and tore it into strips. Then he began bandaging the bullet wound across Severn's ribs.

Severn shut his eyes. He was feeling queasy again.

"How did you get me in here?" he asked. "Didn't anybody see us?"

"Sure they did. Mother and Dad know you're here. You walked in all right. You even spoke to them. I just told them that we were out together and you'd had a fall and were shook up a little. I said you were going to stay here the rest of the night." Bob finished the bandaging. He stood up with the basin in his hand. "You lie down now, Harry. I'll go empty this."

He left the room.

SEVERN flopped forward on the bed. Almost at once he heard a light footstep. He raised his head. Mrs. Devoe had come in. She gave Severn a regal nod.

"I saw the door open," she said, "and I wondered how you were feeling after your fall." She paused, staring. "What's that?" she demanded huskily. "There! On your back!"

Severn was suddenly conscious of his bared torso. "Ship scars," he replied in an embarrassed voice. "I got them long ago."

"No! I don't mean that. There! By your shoulder-blade!"

The woman pointed with trembling finger. Her eyes had taken on a glazed appearance. The whites showed clear around the iris.

Severn twisted his head to examine his shoulder. When he turned to Mrs. Devoe again, her high-nosed features were frostily composed.

"It was a shadow," she explained calmly. "I thought it was a bug. I hate bugs!"

Severn nodded. There had been no bug, and with the lamplight full upon him, there could have been no shadow. He wondered uneasily if the aristocratic Mrs. Devoe had been doing some drinking.

Her harsh lips bent in an anemic smile. "I trust," she said, "that you'll soon recover from your fall. You may stay here for the night. I'll have Mrs. Fenner prepare the room next to this for you."

"Yes'm," mumbled Severn. "Thank you."

Mrs. Devoe swept from the room. At the doorway she looked back, and there was such concentrated ferocity in her glance that Harry Severn felt a chill of horror. Then she was smiling again.

"I trust," she said, "that you will sleep well. Good night, Harry."

She shut the door quietly and firmly.

XV

COLE DEVOE did not believe the somewhat glib story his son had told of an afternoon's ride with Harry Severn and Severn's fall from his horse. Devoe knew that Ted Gamboy and Sheriff Trimble were out on a rustler hunting expedition and he suspected now that Severn and Bob somehow had been mixed up in the affair.

While his suspicions simmered, he was awaiting the return of Ted Gamboy and a detailed report on the evening's happenings. He was waiting in his lamplit office, slumped at his desk, a whisky bottle beside him.

The day of Jean's court trial had been a bad day for Cole Devoe. Yesterday, with the homecoming of his wife, had been a worse day. Now today there was this business of Severn and Bob. Devoe had known his son was weak, but if it turned out that he was crooked as well, the limit would have been reached.

Events were piling upon events, and always in the background as uncanny as a black dog at a funeral, there was the dour figure of Harry Severn. Why? Who *was* Harry Severn? *Curse* Harry Severn!

The cattleman passed his hand across his eyes. He wondered if his

imagination was working overtime. He had a feeling that he was marked by some malign fate, that he was rushed, willy-nilly, toward the abyss of disaster. He reached for the whisky bottle, then stayed his hand.

The office door had opened and closed.

Devoe glanced up at his wife and looked down again. "Madam," he said dismally, "prepare yourself for a shock. I think our son is a rustler." There was no reply, and Devoe lifted his head. "Did you hear me?" he asked.

"I heard you." Minerva Devoe nodded indifferently. She placed her hands on the desk and gazed steadily at the cattle man. "And now you prepare yourself for a shock. I was just in Bob's room. Harry Severn had his shirt off. Did you ever see his back?"

Severn again! Devoe's nerves tightened.

"No," he said. "Is anything the matter with it?"

"Several things. For one thing he's got on a bandage. I think he must have a bullet wound. Another thing is a small patch of moles under his left shoulder-blade. Five of them. They make—"

"No!" cried Devoe. He leaped from his chair. He glared at his wife. "No!" he shouted wildly. "You're imagining things!"

"Keep your voice down!" ordered the woman. Her features were coldly expressionless. "They make," she continued relentlessly, "a little V, with the largest mole at the bottom."

Devoe leaned on the desk. Momentarily he experienced the sensation of whirling speed. His lips moved stiffly.

"Then it's him!"

"Yes," said Minerva Devoe. "I'm positive. It's him."

Devoe carefully sat down. "He's here," he said dully. "Right here in this house." He smiled at his granite-faced wife. "A joke, eh, my dear? The tangled webs we weave—"

He laughed lightly, casually. The laugh got out of control.

"Stop it!" said Minerva Devoe harshly. She thrust the bottle into his hand. "Drink!" she commanded.

Devoe drank so rapidy that he almost strangled. He put down the bottle and pressed his hand to his eyes and waited. The whisky began to burn. Devoe could feel the spreading of its bright, heartening fire. He made a gesture of profundity.

"We must think," he murmured. "We must hold council."

"We must *act!*" said Minerva Devoe. He looked up, and her glittering gaze impaled and held him. "Does he know?" she demanded. "Is there any possibility that he does?"

Weakly he shook his head. "I don't think so." He straightened. "No," he said with assurance. "I'm sure he doesn't."

"Then why did he drift in here? Was it just chance?"

"Yes. I—I think so. It must have been."

"You'd better hope so," she commented grimly. "Him and Jake Hogan both here—it's a long chance that'd bring that about. Does Jake Hogan know he's here? Does he know who *he* is?"

Devoe groaned. "That's what I don't know."

"Tell me again what Jake said when he was here. Every word!"

"Well, first he told Mrs. Fenner that his name was—"

Devoe swung around. There had been a knock at the door.

MRS. FENNER'S disapproving voice came through the panel.

"It's that Hoppelscoot man again, Mr. Devoe. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes," Minerva Devoe replied at once. "Send him in here, Mrs. Fenner." She gave Devoe a frigid smile. "And now," she said in a lowered tone, "we'll find out what Jake Hogan knows."

Jake Hogan entered, or rather, slid into the office. He shut the door behind him, then kept his hand on the latch as if uncertain whether to retreat or advance. His gaze was upon Minerva Devoe.

"Well!" he exclaimed in elaborate astonishment. "If it ain't Jason Porter's nurse gal! Old Tod Suttler's young one. I never will forget the day they strung up old Tod. You remember me, Minerva?"

"Yes," answered the woman calmly.

"Then everything's cozy. You know me and Cole knows me." Jake settled himself comfortably in a chair and winked at Devoe. "Quite a lady she is these days, eh, Cole?"

Devoe made no response. He gazed dumbly at his wife.

"What're you after?" she asked Jake. "More blackmail?"

"Of course not!" exclaimed Jake in an injured tone. "I come here to do you folks a favor, to warn you about something."

"About what?" snapped Devoe.

"About . . . Well, about Harry Severn."

Devoe leaned limply back in his chair.

"Go on," said the woman grimly. "Warn us."

"Let me ask you something. Do you know who Harry Severn is?"

"Yes."

"What? No, you don't! He ain't no common drifter."

"And I tell you," interrupted the woman crisply, "that we do know! What we want to find out is if he knows. Does he, Jake?"

"Not yet he don't. But—" Jake stopped speaking.

From somewhere about her person Minerva Devoe produced a derringer. She held the little gun steady.

"Jake," she said quietly, "have you told him yet? Have you even given him a hint who he is?"

Jake's lantern jaw sagged, then he threw up his hands in abject fright.

"No!" he cried earnestly. "I haven't told him a thing! He's got no idea—I swear it!"

The woman stared at him a moment. She shoved the gun back into its hiding place and nodded to Devoe.

"I think he's probably telling the truth," she said contemptuously.

"It is the truth, I swear it is!" whined Jake. He drew in a deep breath and seemed to regain some of his assurance. "Now," he said, "I'll tell you something good. He thinks I'm his pa."

"What!" Devoe gave a violent start.

"It's gospel truth, Cole. He's even got me staying with him on that little place of his."

Minerva Devoe showed her cold smile. "What's the price, Jake?"

Jake grinned and stroked his bristly cheeks. "Well," he said reflectively. "I figure it ought to be worth a little something to you folks for him to keep on thinking I'm his pa. Just a little something, eh, Minerva?" He winked and then, as if struck by a new thought, squinted craftily. "Or," he drawled, "I might fix it so you'd be rid of him altogether. How'd that be, Minerva?"

The woman leaned forward eagerly. "You mean kill him?"

Devoe gasped. He looked at his wife in horrid fascination.

Jake Hogan, too, seemed startled. He shook his head emphatically. "No, *sir!* I don't mean nothing like that. I'm not going to get mixed up in *that* kind of business!"

"Then what do you mean?"

"I mean," explained Jake carefully, "that I'll get him out of this part of the country for you. I'll play sick or something and I can get a doctor to order me a change of climate. 'Course, Harry being my son, he'll have to go along to nurse his old pa."

The woman glanced at Devoe and shrugged slightly. She went to the office safe.

"It'll take a sight of money, Minerva," Jake said hopefully. "A sick man's got to live awful soft."

"Here's three hundred for now." She flung him a packet of money.

JAKE fingered the money and scowled. "That's nothing!" he complained bitterly. "Even fifty thousand wouldn't hardly be enough."

"I said that was for now! Do you think we keep a gold mine in the house? And if Harry Severn finds out—" The woman made a gesture toward the hidden derringer.

Jake sprang to his feet. "He won't! I swear he won't!"

She opened the door. "I'll see you out," she said.

Devoe remained seated. He stared blankly at the wall. He heard his wife and Jake going along the hall, then the woman returned. She sat down opposite Devoe, folded her hands in her lap and half closed her eyes. She seemed to be thinking.

Devoe wet his lips. "We can't trust him," he murmured.

"No," she replied. "He must be got rid of. Both of them."

Devoe stiffened. "Not Harry!" he said sharply. "It's not his fault. I won't have it! I'd give up everything first!"

She motioned to the whisky bottle. "Drink," she said.

Devoe slumped. He glanced at the bottle and looked away.

"I won't have it, Minerva," he said in a weak voice. "Not Harry. Jake is a different matter. Maybe a word to Jean Targen would be in order."

"Are you crazy?" She jerked around. "Do you think Jean would kill him without finding out why?"

"Well, I could tell him something."

"*You* could tell him?" She laughed jeeringly. "Jake's the one who'd tell him! Jean would see to that. No! We've got to keep him out of this. Not a word to Jean! Understand?"

Devoe nervously rubbed his palms on his coat.

She narrowed her eyes. "You've already said something to Jean!"

Devoe shook his head protestingly. "No, I haven't, not exactly. All I told him was that if he should meet Jake some time and didn't like his looks maybe he could do something about it."

"You idiot!" she cried savagely. "Where's Jean now?"

"I don't know, Minerva. At the bunkhouse, I reckon."

But he was talking to the empty office; his wife had left. He could hear her running toward the back of the house.

Devoe reached for the bottle and took a drink. The whisky had lost its fire. It went down like water. He leaned his head on his hands and when he shut his eyes he could see the stony features of his wife. His nerves were jumping. He had an impulse to bang his head against the wall. He clenched his fists and arose, paced rapidly back and forth. His nerves quieted somewhat as he could feel the whisky beginning to take hold.

He was standing by the bookcase when Minerva came back to the office.

"Jean's gone," she said in a clipped, level tone, "and no one knows where. I sent Bob to town to see if he's there. We've got to find him and keep him away from Jake."

Devoe nodded. His composure now matched his wife's. "Yes," he agreed, "he must be found."

"I told one of the men to saddle Star for you. There's a chance that Jean saw Jake here and is following him. You'll have to ride after him. Out to that little place of Harry Severn's."

"Yes," said Devoe. "I'll go right away." He picked up his hat from the bookcase.

"Wait!" She rushed to the desk, opened a drawer and took out a gun. "Here!"

Devoe thrust the gun under his belt and then gazed stupidly down at it. "What's this for?"

"For Jake. It's got to be done right away before Jean or anyone else can get to him. You've got to do it!"

Devoe recoiled a step. "No!" he

cried hoarsely.

Her lip thinned and raised, showing long, strong teeth. "You spineless idiot," she said softly. "You half-a-man! Must I do it myself? Now get going! Hurry!" Of a sudden her face went whitely furious. She lifted clawed hands as if to spring like a tigress.

From the house to the barn Devoe managed to control his gait to a walk. He got onto his saddle horse. Ordinarily he would never think of running a cold mount. But now, with his feet in the stirrups and the house well behind him, he experienced a chilled shrinking at the base of his spine. He yelled at his horse and spurred senselessly.

FOR a time—he had no notion for how long—Devoe rode with his eyes shut and his mouth open. The wind rushed into his mouth and he shouted it out again. The shouting served as a physical release, vocal expression for his whole quivering nervous system.

The horse swerved and a thin branch whipped across Devoe's nose. The stinging lash startled Devoe and brought him more or less to his senses. He halted his horse and peered about.

He had, Devoe now discovered, come a considerable distance out of his way. He turned his horse and proceeded at a more conventional pace.

A half-hour later he was standing beneath the big bullpine by Harry Severn's little ramshackle barn. Beyond, dim in the moon shadow, he could see the head of Jake Hogan's horse lifted questioningly above the corral poles. On the other side of Devoe was the shack, a knife-edge of light showing at the base of the drawn window blind.

Devoe left his horse under the bullpine and approached the shack on foot. His stride was light and resolute, the stride of a man who has committed himself past all hope of retreat. In his hand he held the gun.

He reached the door and without the slightest hesitation pushed it open and stepped inside. Very nearly he stepped upon the reclining figure of Jake Hogan. Someone had recently placed a bullet-hole between Jake's eyes.

Devoe's first reaction was a feeling of relief that he had been saved a nasty job. He stuffed his gun back under his belt and gazed down at the dead man in somber contemplation.

Then his reason began to work. Who had killed Jake? The answer was obvious. Jean Targen had done it. The very thing which Cole Devoe had sought to prevent had occurred. Jean had got to Jake first!

How much information had Jean forced out of Jake Hogan before he killed him? What use would Jean make of that information? How now to get rid of Jean?

XVI

QUESTIONS multiplied in Devoe's mind with terrifying rapidity. He turned and left the shack, started to run, his legs picking up the tempo of his whirling, despairing thoughts. He flung himself into saddle.

Right now his wife was the last person in the world Devoe wanted to face. He headed for Brinker City and the counsel of Fern Kemp.

After a short distance of break-neck riding, his panic subsided somewhat and he slowed his horse. As he approached town his mood became one of gloomy resignation. He had been chevied to the brink of ruin. Now, feeling himself helpless, he achieved a sort of cool detachment. He was, so to speak, braced for the plunge.

When he left Severn's place Devoe had cut directly across the rangeland. A mile from town he came out on North Pass road. Here he met a horseman. He recognized the large shape of his son.

Bob halted and peered uncertainly

in the night light. "Dad?"

"It's me." Devoe was mildly surprised at his own calmness.

Bob moved closer. "I couldn't find Jean in town. I don't think he's here. Is it important?"

"No," replied Devoe. "Not now. It's all right."

"You going to town, Dad?"

"Yes," said Devoe. Suddenly he felt a strange warmth of affection toward this weakling son of his. Quietly he asked, "What happened today, Bob? Are you in trouble? Did Severn get you into it?"

"What? I don't know what you mean, Dad!" Abruptly the boy ceased speaking. He was silent a moment, then he straightened in the saddle. "Yes," he said. "Only Harry didn't get me into it. He got me out of it."

"That rustling business, wasn't it?"

Bob bent his head. "Yes," he said in a low voice.

"I hope you've had your lesson. You better go home now, son."

Bob jerked up his head. "Ain't you going to do anything about it?"

"No," Devoe cut in gently, "I'm not going to do anything about it. I've made mistakes, too, son. I . . . Well—" On impulse Devoe reached in his pocket and pulled out his buckskin purse. He had no notion how much money it contained—twenty dollars, a hundred. "Here," he cried a bit wildly. "Take this! Spend it on anything—drink, women, cards. Anything! Now good night, son."

Devoe left his amazed son halted in the middle of the road with the purse in his hands. The cattleman went on to Brinker City.

He stabled his horse in the carriage shed and used his key to enter the white-painted house. He strode through the darkened hallway, saw a light at the top of the stairs. Fern's voice came down sharply to him:

"Who's that?"

"Me. Cole. Where's Tess?"

"She's gone for the night. Her sister's sick."

Devoe climbed the stairs. He pushed Fern ahead of him into the lighted bedroom, glanced at the French clock and was astonished to find that it was not yet midnight. Fern was wearing a green silk wrap-around. Her lips and the fingers of her right hand glistened greasliy. Devoe surmised that she'd been chasing wrinkles.

She stared at him questioningly. "What's happened?"

"Everything." Devoe dropped down on the lace spread of her big four-poster bed. "I'm tired," he said wearily.

"It's Harry Severn!" she cried. "Is that it, Cole?"

"Yes," said Devoe. "That's it partly. How'd you guess?"

"He was here yesterday afternoon."

"So?" Devoe laughed lightly. "Sociable rascal, isn't he? Do you know who Harry Severn really is?"

"I do now. And he knows I'm his mother."

"Eh!" Devoe sat bolt upright.

Fern smiled enigmatically. "That's what he knows, Cole. Also—now listen to this—he knows that Jake Hogan is his father."

"That's not news. Jake told me that this evening."

Fern's green eyes widened. "Then Jake knows who Severn is, too!"

"He did know. But he don't know. Jake's dead. Shot."

"Oh-h." She gave him a long glance. "Jean?"

"I'm afraid so."

FERN seated herself at her dressing table. She began wiping the lotion from her cheeks. Her movements became slower. She frowned at Devoe in the pier-glass.

"Why'd you say that, about being afraid so?" she asked.

"Because, my dear, I'm afraid that Jean may have pumped Jake before he shot him. I'm afraid now that Jean knows everything that our friend Jake knew."

Fern spun around. "Are you sure

he does?"

"Fairly sure. I know Jean pretty well."

"That's bad. Jean'll be a hard man to handle."

"Plumb hard. Impossible, I'd say."

"Something got to be done!"

Devoe smiled wryly. "Should I try shooting Jean? D'you think I could beat the professional at his own game?"

Fern was silent, clasping and twisting her hands.

Devoe lay back and shut his eyes. "I wish," he said fretfully, "that I could sleep."

There was another silence, then Devoe heard Fern approaching the bed.

"I'll think of something," she said energetically. "I'll sit up all night thinking. Now go home before Minerva finds out where you've been."

"Minerva!" Devoe shuddered.

"Does she know about Severn, too?"

"Yes. She's the one who found out first. There's a mark on his back that she recognized. She'll kill him, Fern! In the end she's going to kill all of us. She's a devil, Fern. A—a monster!" Devoe shuddered again. In a low, positive voice he said, "I can't go home. I'm afraid to go home."

Fern left the room. She returned to the bed with two small pills and a glass of water.

"Take these," she ordered.

Devoe took the pills. He patted Fern's hand. "Thanks, my dear. Is it strychnine?"

"No," answered Fern. "When the time comes for that, Cole, we'll take it together. Now try to sleep."

She gently pushed him down on the bed and went back to her dressing table.

Devoe lay quiet. He watched Fern with half-closed eyes. She was rubbing her cheeks again.

After a time she said softly, "We could go away, and change our names."

"No," said Devoe drearily. "I can't even run away. I have two children. I can't desert 'em. I'm afraid, but I'm not a coward."

Fern alertly cocked her head. "Did you lock the door when you came in, Cole?"

"I don't remember locking it."

"I thought I heard something move downstairs."

"Imagination, my dear. You're nervous, too."

Fern tiptoed out of the room.

Devoe settled himself drowsily. He could hear Fern's cautious tread on the dark stairway. Suddenly she screamed.

* * * * *

Jean Targen had just returned to Devoe's ranch headquarters after a trip to Harry Severn's little place near North Pass. Jean put his horse in the barn and propelled his pudgy body toward the house.

Duffy, the cantankerous old cook, was smoking a before-bed pipe in front of the cookshack as Jean trudged by, and Jean gave him an unusually genial greeting. At the moment Jean felt a great love for humanity. He was suffused with a warm glow of complacency. He had, in his own estimation, accomplished this night a good stroke of business. A good stroke indeed!

Jean was a craftsman. The tools of his trade were a gun and an absolute fearlessness. In his apprentice days Jean had taken great pride in matching his growing skill against fellow craftsmen. He always had been most scrupulous in observance of the gunfighter's punctilio—the insult, the face-to-face challenge, and the matched draw.

Since Jean invariably triumphed in his combats, the satisfaction of a vanity killing had begun to pall. In late years it was only the most formidable of his victims whom Jean honored with a chance for an even draw. Ordinary, trade-job killings Jean performed by whatever method seemed handiest at the time.

FOR a healthy man without noticeable religious tendencies, Jean Targen led a fairly austere life. He seldom drank, he paid little attention to women, and he didn't care for cards. He did, though, have one secret indulgence—he liked to converse with doomed men. The dilated gaze, the sweated brow, the tangled, pleading tongue—all this gave Jean a pleasurable sense of tremendous power.

Also, it could be enlightening. Tonight was a case in point. His conversation with old Jake Hogan had been extremely enlightening, in fact the most enlightening, power-tingling conversation Jean ever had held.

Smiling to himself, he briskly mounted the steps and crossed Devoe's wide front gallery. Without bothering to knock, he opened the door, entered the house, and strode confidently along the hallway. He saw a light under the office door. He opened that door.

Minerva Devoe was in the office, seated at Devoe's desk. In a sharp voice she cried:

"Where've you been? What d'you mean by walking in like this?"

Jean lost a bit of his assurance, for he had expected to find Devoe in the office. He hesitated, then pushed on in and shut the door behind him.

"Where's Cole?" he asked.

"He's not here."

Jean noticed that the woman did not pursue her line of questioning. Her manner had changed and there was wariness about her now. He also noticed tooth marks on her lower lip. It was evident that she was controlling a violent agitation.

Jean's confidence returned. He sat down and crossed his legs.

"I've got that information you wanted," he remarked casually.

"What information?"

"What you asked me to find out for you before you went East this last time. About Mrs. Eugene Cummings."

"Oh, that! Well? Is he still seeing her?"

"When you're away, yes."

The woman made a grinding noise with her teeth.

"Her real name," Jean went on concisely, "is Fern Kemp. It's my notion she came here first to blackmail Cole. After awhile they got to be such good friends that there was no question of blackmail. Would you know what she could blackmail Cole about?"

"No," replied Minerva Devoe. "And don't try to trip me up with surprise questions," she warned. "Get on with what you know."

"Fern Kemp," Jean continued imperturbably, "was raised on an Illinois farm. When she was sixteen she ran away with a Mississippi River gambler. Since then she's—"

"How'd you find out all this?"

Jean modestly lowered his gaze. "I have friends here and there," he murmured. "White friends, black, red."

"All right! Never mind! Go on!"

"Twenty-five years ago she shot a man just the other side of the mountains from here. The law got after her and she had to run for it. She had a baby with her." Jean paused. He saw the woman's long teeth creeping down over her underlip. "She abandoned the baby," he said abruptly, "to an ex-rustler named Jake Hogan."

The woman released her lip. "Now how," she asked in a coldly curious tone, "could you have found that out?"

Jean smiled. This was the moment he had been waiting for.

"I've just had a little talk with Jake Hogan," he announced quietly.

XVII

MINERVA DEVOE came out of her chair. So explosive was her movement, so viciously contorted were her features that Jean dropped his hand to his gun. The woman recaptured her self-possession. Her face assumed a stony calm and she sank back in her chair.

At once Jean fired another verbal shot. "Now," he asked, "would you know what Fern Kemp could blackmail Cole about?"

"Yes," she answered. "How much did Jake tell you? I suppose, by the way, that he's dead now."

"Dead as a herring! And he told me a lot. Enough that I know you want to get rid of Harry Severn."

"How much is that going to cost?"

"A cool ten thousand. Payable now."

"Ten thousand! D'you think I'm a gold mine?"

"I'm reasonable," said Jean mildly. "If you haven't got cash handy, I'll settle for an I.O.U. now!"

Minerva Devoe gazed steadily at the gunman. Her eyes had taken on a peculiar glazed appearance. The iris seemed to have contracted so that the whites showed a full circle.

"All right," she said in a harsh tone. "Maybe we can do business."

She snatched pen and paper from the desk and wrote rapidly. She handed to Jean the paper which read:

I hereby acknowledge a debt of $10,000 to Jean Targen. Minerva Devoe.

"And don't try to collect on that without delivering," she warned coldly.

Jean folded the paper and stuck it in his pocket. He wagged a finger at the woman. "And don't you," he said, "try to welsh on it after I do deliver. If you do, I start talking."

"I'm not likely to welsh on it. I have some more jobs for you."

"Yeah? Who else?"

"Everybody who knows anything about this business."

"And how many's that?" Jean asked cautiously.

"Fern Kemp, for one."

"No, you don't!" Jean shook his head. "No women!"

Her lip curled scornfully. "Then I'll do it. You take Duffy."

"Not old Duffy! The cook?"

"Yes. He's been here a long time. He was here when Jason Porter was alive. I've never been sure how much he knows. Duffy's got to be killed. He's old, anyway. It don't matter much. A thousand for him."

Jean felt that the office was growing warm. He had known that Minerva was a tough customer. Now, though, she was looming up in a new and uncomfortable perspective. She was a bit tougher than he had imagined.

"Duffy it is then," he said weakly. "But I hate to do it." His manner became caustic. "Any more? How about Cole?"

Once again he saw the flash of fury across her features. "No!" she cried chokingly. "I'd get nothing. The children get everything. He showed me his will."

Jean nodded understandingly. "Smart man," he commented drily.

Mentally he made a note that he would play smart, too. From now on he would be mighty careful when going around dark corners.

The woman stood up. "Let's go," she said energetically. "We might as well get it over with now."

"Get what over with?"

"Harry Severn, of course. He's been hurt. He's lying in Bob's room right this minute."

"You want me to do it now?" exclaimed the gunman. "Here!"

"Certainly. Why not? Bob and Cole are away."

Jean gripped his chair. Events were speeding up with bewildering rapidity.

"And what," he asked feebly, "do you expect to tell a jury? I was seen coming in here. Have you thought of that?"

"Certainly. I've thought of it. He attacked me, and you killed him to save me. That's the story we'll tell."

"And you expect 'em to believe it? That Severn attacked *you?*"

She looked at him with her queer, creepy eyes. "Is there any reason why a jury wouldn't believe it?" she inquired coldly.

"No," said Jean hastily. "It's just that it would seem odd."

"Are you afraid?"

JEAN didn't deign to reply. He arose in dignified silence.

The woman smiled faintly. "You wait here," she ordered. "I'll go into his room and scream. Then you come running. Mrs. Fenner and Alice both will hear the scream. They'll have to back up our story."

Jean shook his head in slow wonder. "Ma'am," he said feelingly, "if the devil ever takes a bride, you'll be it." He bowed with ironic gallantry and opened the door.

Minerva Devoe started to leave, then stopped.

Mrs. Fenner was coming along the hallway. She turned a puzzled acid face toward the two.

"He's gone," she complained. "I don't know when."

"Who's gone?"

"Harry Severn is. I fixed up the room like you said, and now he ain't in it."

"You brainless scut! You mean you let him get away?"

"Get away?" The housekeeper opened her eyes in injured astonishment. "I wasn't trying to keep him. And don't call me a name like that!"

With a strangling cry Minerva Devoe hurled herself at the housekeeper and seized her by the hair. Mrs. Fenner waved her arms wildly, bleating with terror.

Jean rushed by the struggling women, hurried through the hallway and out the back door. In the dark outside he ran into Alice Devoe. The girl was sobbing.

He gripped her shoulder. "Where's Severn?" he asked fiercely.

The surprised girl pointed mutely to the barn.

"How long since he left?"

"Ten—fifteen m-minutes ago. I d-don't know how long."

Jean released her and hustled on. Old Duffy was still in front of the cookshack. He shouted something after Jean, and Jean didn't bother to listen. He went into the barn and saddled a horse.

It was Jean's notion that Severn probably had gone to his place near North Pass, so Jean rode in that direction. When he was within a mile of Severn's place, he heard a distant shot. He stopped to listen. Then he heard the drum of hooves. Somewhere in the night there was a fast-running horse. The sound came closer, then receded as if the horse, turning, was now headed for Brinker City.

Jean went on, then stopped again. He heard more horses. They were coming straight toward him. A group of riders appeared on the rise just ahead. The horsemen halted, surrounding Jean.

Ted Gamboy spoke out of the dark. "What're you doing here?"

"Riding," Jean answered coolly. "What're you doing?"

"We're hunting Harry Severn." Sheriff Trimble pushed forward. "Did he come this way?"

"What's he done?" countered Jean.

"Killed a man. Some old range tramp. Out at Severn's place. I don't know who he was . . . Did you see Severn?"

Jean shook his head. "No, but I heard him going by. He turned on you. He was heading for town."

Instantly Trimble wheeled his horse. "Come on!" he shouted.

The posse followed the sheriff. Jean took out after the group and joined it. He was smiling.

The riders cut across range until they reached North Pass road. A solitary horseman was approaching them. They challenged him. The horseman was young Bob Devoe.

"Bob, did anybody pass you going toward town?" asked Trimble.

"You mean Dad?"

"No. Anybody else?"

"I thought I heard somebody. Off there." Bob pointed.

"Hey!" someone called suddenly.

"Who's this one?"

Another rider was approaching the halted posse, coming up from behind as if he had been following it. Jean stared. He recognized the small, slumped shape of old Duffy, the cook.

In the momentary diversion created by the arrival of old Duffy, young Bob Devoe moved close to Jean.

"They found the cattle, Jean," he said in a low voice. "They almost got me."

"Tell me later," Jean interrupted impatiently. "Go on home."

"Who're they after now? How'd you get in with this bunch?"

"Never mind. Go on home. Get out of here."

Bob sighed and moved slowly off.

DUFFY, in response to the challenge of the posse, was proclaiming belligerently that he was a free citizen and could go where and when he pleased and didn't have to answer questions from anyone. He also stated his intention of joining the posse.

"I'm old," he said, "but I'm not scared of nothing. And there's nobody going to stop me!"

Jean Targen didn't wait to hear the rest of old Duffy's declamation. He eased himself away from the others. After a short distance of quietly walking his horse, he used spurs. The horse was comparatively fresh and it was fast, one of Devoe's quarter-strain runners. Jean was sure now that he would reach town well before the posse.

Severn, so Jean thought, if he was heading for town, would try to take refuge in one of two places—Sam Teller's house or the residence of Fern Kemp. Jean had seen and noted that Severn's call upon Fern Kemp yesterday. He decided to go to Fern's place first.

There was a light behind the drawn shade of one of the upstairs rooms in the Plummer Street house. Jean dismounted and led his horse on the soft lawn by the driveway. A saddler was tied at the corner of the carriage shed. The horse belonged to Devoe, but the rigging was Harry Severn's.

Jean Targen tied his horse beside the other and paused to take off his spurs. He went to the rear of the house and tried the door. It was unlocked. Jean entered and gently closed the door. He was in darkness. He stretched his hands before him and moved on silent feet. Then he stopped. He heard light footsteps overhead.

Suddenly a woman screamed.

XVIII

ONLY a few minutes after Mrs. Devoe had bid Harry Severn good night, Bob Devoe returned to the bedroom where Severn lay.

"How you doing?" he asked.

Severn, stretched out on the bed, grunted. "Good, I guess."

"Want a drink?" Bob produced a bottle from a bureau drawer.

Severn sat up and grimaced. He took a pull at the bottle.

"Lie down again," ordered Bob. "I'll be back after awhile."

Severn lay down again. Bob turned the lamp low and went out.

Whisky, Severn decided fifteen minutes later, was the correct medicine. He was feeling stronger already. He began to take stock of his condition. His head was sore to the touch, but beyond that he had suffered no serious damage in the fall from his horse. The bullet furrow across his ribs burned with just enough heat to let him know it was there.

Actually, as he discovered when he twisted his body, the tight bandage Bob had wrapped around him bothered him more than the wound did. His queasiness was gone altogether—shocked out of him, he supposed, by that strange, ferocious glance Mrs. Devoe had bent upon him as she had left the room.

Why had that stony-featured woman looked at him in that way? Why

her agitation at seeing his bared back?

Bob Devoe poked his head back into the room. "Got to go to town on an errand for Mother," he explained hastily. "You lie quiet. I'll be back." He glanced behind him and lowered his voice. "I've told Alice everything that happened. She's making you some broth."

"All right," Severn grinned. "I'm not that feeble."

Bob waved and departed. In his hurry he left the door ajar.

Severn lay with one arm partly across his closed eyes. He wondered what urgency could have caused Mrs. Devoe to send Bob to town at this time of evening. And why again had she looked at him, Harry Severn, in such a peculiarly venomous manner?

He remembered what Duffy had said about Devoe's wife. She was, so the old cook had said, the one person he was afraid of. Maybe he wasn't so crazy at that. Maybe Duffy knew what he was talking about.

Severn heard the lightest possible of sounds in the hall outside the door. His eyes, shadowed by his arm, opened just enough so that he could peer through his lashes. He saw the door, left ajar by Bob, being slowly pushed inward. In the widening aperture appeared the pallid, high-nosed face of Minerva Devoe.

For a time she stared expressionlessly at the apparently sleeping man. Then her strange eyes narrowed and her lips showed a faint smile, a smile that seemed somehow to be more frightful in its implication than her former glance of hatred. She withdrew her head and softly shut the door.

Severn's hair was prickling. He wondered if the goose bumps on his exposed chest had been noticeable. At that moment he arrived at one definite decision. He was *not* going to stay in this house the remainder of the night! He was going to get out of here as quickly and quietly as he could. He sat up and reached for his boots.

By the time Severn was fully clothed he heard someone stirring about in the next room—Mrs. Fenner, he supposed, making up the bed for him. He opened the door and looked out. He left the room and tiptoed along the hall to the back of the house, landed in the Devoes' large and elaborately equipped kitchen.

A lamp burned there. Something in a burnished copper pot was simmering on the stove. Alice Devoe, evidently catching a breath of cool night air, was standing by the opened outside door. She turned and gave a startled exclamation.

"What're you doing here?" she cried. "You're supposed to be in bed. Bob said you were staying all night."

"I can't. I've got some business I've got to tend to."

"You're making that up, Harry. Something's the matter."

"No." Severn shook his head doggedly. "It's just that I got to leave. Tell your mother for me, Alice, will you?"

AT MENTION of her mother a change came over the girl. Her eyes blanked and she seemed to retreat within herself.

"All right," she said in a dead tone. "I'll tell her."

Severn moved past her and into the outside gloom.

"Harry! Wait!" Alice rushed after him. "Whatever's happened between you and mother, it's not going to make any difference between us, is it?" she asked fiercely.

He looked at her. Her face, upturned, was a soft blur in the darkness. She was a nice girl, but a wilful one. She was Devoe's daughter. She was a barrelful of money—and she was Severn's for the wanting.

Was money so important, after all? How happy was Cole Devoe? How many meals could you eat at one time? How many beds could you sleep in at one time? What was a fair cash price for a man's self-respect?

Peg Teller might have the right, smart answers for these questions, but Harry Severn knew now that he didn't have them. He never had had them—not the right answers. Somewhere along the line there had been a twist in his rough, tough schooling, a wrong twist.

"No," he said to the girl, "it's not your mother that makes a difference between us. It's somebody else. It's Tom Bailey."

"That farmer!" Alice stiffened. "Whatever makes you think that?"

"There's worse things than farmers. A lot worse."

"I hate him! I wish you'd let Jean kill him! I'd like to do it myself!"

"Hush! You don't mean any of those things." Suddenly he felt infinitely older and wiser than this young girl. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I think," he said gently, "that you love him. What do you think, Alice?"

The stiffening slowly went out of her. Her shoulders trembled.

"I hate you!" she whispered. "Not him, but you. I could kill you!"

"I know. You hate me because I've made you admit the truth to yourself. It works that way. Well . . . Luck, Alice. And good-by." He went on toward the barn.

As he passed the cookshack, old Duffy's voice called to him guardedly:

"Harry? Jean Targen just went in the front awhile ago."

"All right. I'm not looking for him."

"I just thought I'd tell you. You listen to everything I tell you, and you'll be a smarter man. Maybe you'll live longer."

"All right." Severn nodded indulgently. "Thanks, Duffy."

Severn found his saddle gear behind the grain bin in the horse barn where Bob had hidden it. He took a mount from the first occupied box stall he came to, left Devoe's ranch and headed for his own place near North Pass. . . .

By the corner of his canted little barn Severn halted and dismounted. Immediately he sensed something wrong here. Jake Hogan's old horse was moving about restlessly in the corral. The shack door was open, sending a fan of yellow lamplight into the night.

Severn scowled at the open doorway. The figure of a man showed there. The man left the shack and started running. He ran into the blackness beneath the big bullpine, then reappeared. He was now on horseback and spurring desperately. He roared off in a bee-line direction toward Brinker City and was swallowed by the shadows. Belatedly Severn realized that the man had been Cole Devoe.

Severn tied his horse by the barn and warily stalked to the shack. He looked in through the open door, then entered the shack and leaned moodily against the wall.

Alive, Jack Hogan had been mean in spirit and unlovely in physique. Now, sprawled on the floor, eyes slightly popped from the explosion pressure of the bullet between them, he had achieved death without dignity. Harry Severn viewed the corpse dispassionately. He had no doubt that Devoe had killed Jake, but why had he done it?

On second thought, Severn wondered why he had heard no shot. Evidently Jake had been killed while Severn was still some distance away. But why, if Devoe had done the killing, had he stayed around the shack so long afterward?

There were more quick thoughts. Jake had mentioned Cole Devoe once or twice. Had Jake had some hold over Devoe? Had he been blackmailing Devoe? If so, on what grounds?

THEN Severn had the most startling thought of all. Was there a possibility that Jake Hogan was not his father after all? Was there the possibility that Devoe himself, so close to Fern Kemp, was his father?

Abruptly Severn lifted his head. He had heard horses. Hastily he ducked out of the shack and slammed the door. He had nearly reached the barn when a body of riders swept into sight.

"Halt!" someone cried. "Stand still!"

Severn halted, plastered against the corral gate.

"That you, Harry?" Sheriff Trimble rode close. "How long you been here, Harry?"

"For awhile," Severn answered evasively.

"Didn't see two fellows going by here, did you? At just about dark. Most likely they were in a hurry."

"No," said Severn.

There was a moment of silence after this. The horsemen pushed in about Severn. He could feel their hostility and dark skepticism.

"All right, boys, don't crowd the man!" said Trimble sharply. "Move on a little. I'll talk to Harry."

The riders behind Trimble faded back. They milled in a slow, restless group toward the shack.

"We got two of 'em, Harry," Trimble said quietly.

"The rustlers Gamboy told you about?"

"That's right. And two got away. Sure you didn't see them?"

Severn didn't reply. Inwardly he groaned. Out of the tail of his eye he saw that one of the posse had dismounted. It looked like Otto Krantz. Krantz was at the door, he was opening it.

"Harry—" began Trimble in a determined voice.

"Hey!" bellowed Krantz. "What is this? Here is a dead man!"

Trimble swung around. Severn darted past him and to the shadowed corner of the barn. He jerked loose his tied horse and sprang into saddle. He raced away on the old wagon trail that came out of North Pass road. The posse took after him. A gun cracked.

Beyond that single shot, there was no more firing. By the time Severn had crossed North Pass road, the posse, horses weary from the day's riding, was hopelessly outdistanced. Severn went a short way on, then halted to listen. He heard no sound of pursuit.

At once Severn changed his direction, following a course parallel to North Pass road. He was now heading toward Brinker City and Fern Kemp's house on Plummer Street. He had a strong hunch that he would find Cole Devoe there.

Once he had reached town, Severn saw a light behind the drawn shade of one of the second-floor windows in the Plummer Street house. He walked his horse over the lawn to the carriage shed and dismounted. Inside the shed was a Boxed D saddler.

Severn tied his own mount by the corner of the shed, approached the back door of the house and tested it. The door was unlocked. He entered the house and softly closed the door.

The darkness here was almost complete. He pushed forward, his spurs making a faint jingling noise. One of them hooked on a carpet edge, and he stumbled. He stopped and held his breath. Then he heard voices overhead and went on.

Before Severn was a stairway with light from an open door showing at the top. At once Severn stopped again. Fern Kemp was coming down the stairs on tiptoe. Suddenly she saw Severn. She screamed.

Severn snatched out his gun, bounded up the stairs past Fern and halted in the open doorway. Before him was a bedroom cluttered with feminine bric-a-brac and lighted by two rose-shaded lamps. Seated rigidly on the edge of a large four-poster bed was Cole Devoe.

Devoe looked into Severn's dark, hard features and he looked into the barrel of a drawn gun. He smiled wanly.

"Well?" he said.

Severn made a jabbing motion. "Pull that gun out of your belt with

your thumb and one finger!" he ordered brusquely. "Drop it on the floor and kick it under the bed."

Devoe dropped his gun and kicked it under the bed.

FERN KEMP brushed by Severn, came into the room and sat down at her dressing table, facing the two men.

She seemed to be calm now. She looked brightly at Severn.

"You wanted something, Harry?"

"I want to know why Cole killed Jake Hogan!"

"So that's it!" Devoe shook his head. "I didn't kill him."

"I saw you riding away from my shack."

"But you didn't see me kill him. If you don't believe me, examine that gun under the bed. It hasn't been fired in a year."

"Then who did kill him?"

"I don't know," said Devoe promptly. "I rode up to your shack and found him dead, so I rode away again in a hurry."

"What were you doing at my shack?"

Devoe rubbed his palms on his coat. "That," he said curtly, "is my business. You're not a lawman any more, Harry."

"You're being tiresome, Harry." Fern pushed out her lips. "And do put away that gun! You ought to know you can't threaten Cole."

Severn felt baffled. All at once he was conscious of the ridiculous, melodramatic figure he must cut in this totally feminine room. He looked at Fern in her green silk wrapper, her white hair piled high above her incongruously youthful face.

Here, he thought grimly, is my mother. He looked at Cole. And here—

He holstered his gun. "One question," he said doggedly. "Who was my father? Jake Hogan or you?"

He pointed at Devoe. Devoe didn't reply.

XIX

EYES set and staring, Fern Kemp was motionless at her dressing table. Suddenly Severn became aware that they were not looking at him but at some point a little behind him. He started convulsively as cool metal touched the nape of his neck.

"Don't look around, Harry!" the chuckling voice of Jean Targen said, almost in his ear. "Walk straight over to that kind of a sofa there, then set down and put your hands on your knees."

Severn walked steadily to the chaise longue, sat down and put his hands on his knees. He gazed dismally at Jean Targen.

Jean, it was evident, was in great good humor. He posed in the doorway, holding his gun negligently, his round blue eyes sparkling and pleased.

"First," he said with the brisk air of one disposing of tedious formalities, "I want it understood that anybody making a wrong move gets shot."

"What you mean by coming in here like this?" Devoe asked hollowly. "What you doing here?"

"Business," said Jean. "Official business for your wife."

Devoe shivered. He cast an agonized glance at Fern. Fern, apparently, had lost interest in what was going on. She had clasped her hands in her lamp and was frowning pensively at the tips of her slippers.

Jean strode into the room, swept the door shut behind him and settled himself in the nearest chair. He held his gun pointed at Severn.

"Now this," he said comfortably, "is the way I like to do business. Everybody quiet and sensible and nobody excited." He smiled maliciously. "You're not excited, are you, Harry?"

"No," said Severn.

Jean kept smiling. "Sometimes," he said, "they think they're keeping cool and calm, and you can see nerves twitching all over them. By the way,

Harry, is that something twitching in your cheek?"

Severn smiled back at him. "I got a wild hair," he said.

Jean scowled. It was plain that the answer didn't please him.

"I suppose," said Severn, "that your business is with me."

"That's right, Harry." Jean brightened. "No hurry, though. I like to do these things sociable. Tie up all loose ends first. For instance, I heard you asking who killed Jake Hogan."

"I can guess now," said Severn wearily. "You did."

"Right. Likewise, I heard you asking who your old man was."

Devoe uttered an inarticulate cry.

Jean shook his head reprovingly. "Don't get yourself in an uproar, Cole. It won't hurt now for him to find out who he is. *He's* not going to get any good out of it!"

Severn bent forward. "Who was it?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Jason Porter, of course. You know who Jason Porter was, don't you? He's the one Cole inherited all his rocks from. Jason was your old man. It's your rocks that Cole inherited, Harry. Right, Cole?"

Devoe didn't speak. He didn't need to speak. His pale, sweating face was answer enough. Severn looked at Fern. She still was frowning at the tips of her slippers.

Jean Targen laughed delightedly. "No, Harry," he said. "She's not your ma, if that's what you're thinking. Your ma was Mrs. Jason Porter, all proper and legal. Right, Fern Kemp?"

At mention of her name, Fern stirred slightly. "Yes," she answered. She lifted her head. "Tell him now!" she cried suddenly and savagely. "Tell him the whole thing!"

"I can't," Jean said. "All I know is what Jake Hogan told me. What I want to know is how you got hold of Harry in the first place."

The woman bent her head again. "I found him," she said in a low voice. "It was raining and dark. I thought I heard a baby crying. I couldn't believe it at first."

"That was below Black-hole Canyon."

"Yes. Several miles below. There'd been a flood higher up and in one place the water had come as far as the trail. That's how I found Harry. His dress had been snagged on the branch of a windfall pine and he was hanging there and crying. He must have been carried miles that way until the windfall was stranded by the trail."

"You didn't know who he was?"

"No," said Fern. "I thought he must belong to some washed-out nester family. I just bundled him under my slicker and went on. I was in a hurry. I stopped at Jake Hogan's cabin that night. When I went on next morning, I left the baby there. Jake's wife, I guess, thought the baby was mine. I didn't tell her any different."

JEAN'S eyes were on her steadily.

"And then?" he prompted.

"And after that," said Fern, "I was in a good many places. I forgot all about the baby. Six years ago I drifted into these parts again. I happened to hear about the stage-coach accident at Black-hole Canyon on the night of the flood. Mrs. Jason Porter was drowned in the stage, but her baby's body hadn't been found until a month afterwards. It had been identified by Minerva Suttler.

"I knew something about Minerva Suttler, and it seemed to me that such an identification would be pretty hard to make after a month. And then when I heard that Cole Devoe had inherited from Porter and had married Minerva Suttler, I began to put two and two together. I wondered if Minerva Suttler hadn't made a false identification of some drowned nester baby just so Cole Devoe could inherit. So I hunted up Cole."

"To blackmail him?"

"Yes," said Fern. "But there wasn't much to work with. I had no idea what had become of Jake Hogan or

the baby."

"He struck out for California the next day."

"Yes, I know that now."

"Jake Hogan," continued Jean expansively, "didn't know about that stage accident either. Not till sixteen years later. Then *he* put two and two together. But by that time Harry had run away from him. Jake set out to look for Harry so he could use him to blackmail Cole. He got into trouble somewheres and landed in the pen for eight years. When Jake got out of the pen he decided to try his hand at blackmailing Cole without wasting any more time looking for Harry. And the first person he runs into when he gets here is Harry himself. Talk about luck!" Jean shook his head wonderingly.

Severn looked down at his hands. His knuckles were ridged where he was gripping his knees. It was all clear now. Jake Hogan and Fern had pretended to be his parents because they didn't want him to know who his real parents were. Jake had wanted to use him for blackmailing Devoe. Fern, Severn guessed, had merely wanted to protect Devoe and his barrelful of money.

"What was the baby's name?" he muttered.

"Jason Robert Porter," said Fern. "That's your name, Harry."

Severn reached up to wipe his face.

Jean jabbed with his gun. "Hands, Harry! Careful!"

Severn clutched his knees again. Devoe broke into a torrent of speech.

"I didn't mean to cheat you, Harry! Believe me, I didn't! I really thought you were dead. It wasn't till years afterward that I began to suspect that my wife had—had . . . Well—" Devoe seemed to pull himself together by a tremendous effort of will. In a changed tone he said, "I still don't know that you're Porter's son. In my opinion—"

"In my opinion," said Jean, "it's getting late."

"Yes," agreed Devoe with a sort of desperate eagerness. "Late. You're right, Jean. I think we should all—" He paused, stared at the smiling gunman, then leaped to his feet. "No!" he shouted wildly. "I won't have it! Not here! I forbid it!"

"You'll have it," said Jean sternly, "because I'm being paid to do it. Now set down!"

Devoe sat down. He held his head with both hands.

"You know what's coming, Harry?" said Jean.

"Yes," said Severn. "Killing. Like with Monahan and Jake."

"No," said Jean. "With you it's going to be a little different. You notice I've let you keep your gun." He flicked his gun to one side. "Any time before that clock strikes one, you're privileged to try your luck first, Harry. When it strikes, I'm going to try mine."

Deliberately Jean holstered his own weapon and rested his small hands on his plump knees. He leaned forward, intently scrutinizing Severn.

"Scared, Harry?"

Severn didn't answer. He wasn't scared. He wasn't even mildly excited. His emotions seemed to have gone on a vacation. His physical senses had become singularly keen, particularly his hearing. He was conscious now—loud it sounded—of the steady ticking of the clock on the shelf above him and to the right. He could hear Devoe's quick, shallow breathing. He heard the faint scrape of silk as Fern made some slight movement.

FERN, who was to the left of Jean, had resumed the contemplation of her slippers. One hand lay in her lap. The waggling of her stiffened forefinger attracted Severn's attention. The finger was pointing to her right arm which was draped across the dressing table. Under her right hand was a silver powder box.

Severn watched in veiled puzzle-

ment as slowly, with a twisting motion, Fern removed the convex lid from the powder box. She turned the lid over and set it down silently. Her fingers inched along the dressing table and closed about a nail file.

Jean Targen did not notice what Fern's right hand was doing. He was absorbed in studying Severn. At the moment Jean had the appearance of a man who is living intensely. His color had heightened; his eyes had taken on an exceptional brilliance. There was an almost imperceptible quivering of his pudgy body as if within him some powerful spring were being wound tighter and tighter. His glance flicked again to the clock. The tip of his tongue darted across his lips.

"Half a minute yet, Harry."

Out of the corner of his eye Severn saw Fern poising the file above the metal box lid. He drew in a quiet breath and held it.

The file descended and struck a single silvery note. Instantly Severn's hand whipped to his gun.

For the briefest second before his hand, too, went into motion, Jean Targen's eyes showed surprise.

Severn shot with his thumb knuckle touching his hip. He didn't hear Jean's gun, but he saw the flash and felt a tug at his sleeve.

Jean's gun fell to the floor. The French clock struck a single golden note. Jean looked at the clock, then his eyes slid around toward Fern in a terrible glance of accusation. His mouth opened and emitted a laugh that sounded like the whirr of a broken spring. Then he tumbled forward out of his chair.

Severn holstered his gun. His ears were ringing. Smoke, flattening into a thin cloud layer, was drifting toward the rose-shaded lamps. Devoe, chin propped on his hands, was gazing at him fixedly.

Severn looked down at this bullet-ripped coat sleeve.

"Better be sure he's dead," Fern said in a strained voice.

"I'll see," muttered Devoe.

He arose slowly as if his joints had turned old and stiff. He bent over Jean Targen, then reached back and jerked off the lace bedspread. He covered Targen with the spread and stood there uncertainly, rubbing his palms on his coat.

Severn looked at Fern. Her head was bowed as she watched with frowning interest the little pleats her fingers were building in her silk wrapper.

"He was fast," Severn said hoarsely. "Too fast for me."

"Yes," said Fern. "I knew that."

"He was surprised. That's what saved me. He wasn't expecting it when you hit that box lid."

"No," said Fern. "I knew he wouldn't be." She glanced up at him and smiled almost shyly. "I never had a son of my own," she murmured. A strange sadness came into her green eyes. "Watch out for time, Harry. It catches up with you. It's faster than Jean Targen."

XX

GRIMLY nodding, Severn stood there. He didn't know what to say.

Devoe cleared his throat for attention. His indecision was gone. He spoke brusquely.

"You understand, Harry," he said, "that you can claim only half of Jason Porter's estate. By his will I inherit your mother's share whether you're alive or not."

"As far as I'm concerned, you can keep all of it," Severn said.

"Also," Devoe continued, "you must realize that you're going to have a heap of trouble proving your identity." He scowled, "What did you say?"

"I said," repeated Severn clearly, "that you can keep all of it. I don't want any part of your money."

Devoe shook his head. "No, you don't!" he said coldly. "Whatever your scheme is, it won't work. The

best thing you can do is to take a fair settlement now and call it quits. If it goes to court, I'll kick you. Now what do you consider a fair settlement?"

Anger at the dull incomprehension of this man blazed in Severn. He nodded grimly.

"All right. I'll tell you what I want. Keep Mark Trimble in as sheriff as long as he wants to stay. Quit fighting Otto Krantz and the rest of the Horse Flat farmers and quit importing gunmen like Jean Targen."

Devoe shuddered. "I will," he promised earnestly. "Believe me, Harry, I'll do all of that!"

"And clear me of the charge of killing Jake Hogan. Trimble and a posse are hunting me now for that."

"That'll be no trouble. What else?"

"Also," said Severn on sudden inspiration, "I borrowed one of your saddle horses tonight. I like the horse. I'll keep it."

"Take it, and welcome. And what else?"

"And that," said Severn heavily, "is all. We're quits. You've heard every last thing I want. Want me to put it in writing?"

Devoe stared helplessly.

Fern sighed. "He means it, Cole," she said gently. "You don't understand it, but that's what he means . . . Are you going to stay around here, Harry?"

"No!" replied Severn. "I'm going to sell my place and get out of this valley just as fast as I can."

"I'll buy your place," said Devoe. "Ten thousand dollars!"

"Eh? I paid only six hundred."

"I'll still give you ten thousand for it. It's worth it to me."

"Let him, Harry," muttered Fern. "Be a little charitable."

Severn looked hard at Devoe. He guessed that it wasn't so much land as conscience-ease that Cole Devoe was trying to buy now.

"All right," he said with faint contempt. "It's a deal."

"What's that?" cried Fern.

There was a trampling of horses in the street and by the house.

"I think Trimble's posse has found me," said Severn.

There was a pounding on the front door and Trimble's voice crying:

"Open up! This is the law! Who's in there? Open up!"

"I'll tend to this," said Devoe. He marched out of the room.

Severn and Fern looked at each other. They could hear Devoe at the door talking in a low tone. Then there was talking outside, and Severn heard horses moving off down the street.

"Trimble's sending them away."

"Sounds like it."

"He's not a bad man," said Fern softly. "Cole, I mean. It's just that he's—well, he's a little weak in some ways. He's like a man that's got the gambling fever. Nothing else matters."

Severn nodded, although he was sure Fern was wrong. Devoe was not, in his estimation, by any means a weak man.

Devoe was coming back up the stairs. He was talking loudly now:

"—waving his gun like a crazy man. I think Jean must've gone crazy. He was going to kill us all. If it hadn't been for Harry—"

"Yes," said Sheriff Trimble. "I understand."

The two entered the room. The sheriff bobbed his head at Fern.

"Cole's cleared you on that killing out at your place, Harry," he said to Severn. "Nobody'll bother you on that."

"All right."

TRIMBLE glanced down at the covered body of Jean.

"And Cole's told me how this happened. I won't hold you, Harry, but I want you to be around for the inquest."

"All right. I'll be there."

There was a pause while Trimble pulled back the lace bedspread, looked at Jean Targen, then covered

him again. Into this small pool of silence Cole Devoe splashed three quiet words:

"Minerva is dead." He had spoken to Fern.

"What?" A pallor washed across her features. *"What?"*

"Tell her, Sheriff," said Devoe.

Trimble shook his head mournfully. "It just now happened, just outside of town. A terrible thing, ma'am. We all feel terrible."

"Never mind that," Devoe cut in impatiently. "Tell her."

"Well, we were just outside of town, ma'am, all of us. It was a posse, kind of. We'd had quite a day, and I guess all of us were a little jumpy. Anyway, there was a man coming down the road toward us and riding like blazes. I hollered for him to stop, and he didn't stop. Then Otto Krantz hollered for him to stop or we'd shoot. And he still didn't stop. He just yelled something back at us and took off his hat and batted at his horse with it. And then I saw it wasn't a man at all. It was Mrs. Devoe."

"She'd do that sometimes," Devoe said coolly. "She'd put on levis and ride like wild through the hills."

"Well, she was sure riding wild tonight. And she was sure togged out like a man and had a gun on her hip."

"A gun!" whispered Fern. "She was coming here!"

Devoe inclined his head.

"What'd you say, ma'am?"

"Nothing," said Devoe. "Go on with the story, Sheriff."

"Well, naturally, as soon as I saw who it was, I shouted to the boys to let her go on. But I guess Duffy didn't hear me.

"Duffy?" exclaimed Severn. "Not old Duffy!"

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, old Duffy. He'd just joined up with us and, as I say, I guess he didn't hear me. Anyway, he pulled out that old horse pistol of his and shot her dead center. 'Course he feels terrible. Although—" For a moment Trimble seemed to be groping for words. "Although, of course," he finished, "when you get as old as Duffy you don't show your feelings so much. You're in a kind of haze, I reckon."

"Yes," said Devoe. "Poor old Duffy. I know how he must feel. What a tragic accident! My poor, poor Minerva."

Severn stood up. "I'm leaving," he announced thickly.

He left the house. He got into saddle and passed slowly along the dark, quiet street. On impulse, he turned down to Main Street and rode by the Blue Bull Saloon. A number of horses belonging, he guessed, to the posse, were tied at the hitch-rack there.

He rode more slowly as he came opposite the Teller home. He saw a light in the kitchen. Peg Teller spoke from the porch shadows.

"All right. I'm still up, pardner. I thought you'd be dragging along."

He dismounted and joined her on the porch. "Are you up on the latest news yet?" he asked.

"Some of it. Sam was over to tell me. I know about Cole's wife. And I heard that—"

"My poor, poor Minerva."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just getting a bad taste out of my mouth."

"Yeah? Well, there're all sorts of stories about you. Are you in the clear, pardner?"

"In the clear all around."

"That's good. Coffee?"

"Yes, lady!"

Severn followed Peg through the house and into the kitchen. He sat at the table, skimmed his hat against the wall and stretched out his legs. He was tired, he suddenly realized—dog tired! The stoked-up fire crackled in the stove. The lamp cast a steady, cozy glow across the room. Peg's starched dress swished as she moved briskly about.

She put beans in the coffee grinder and began grinding.

SEVERN watched her with lazy appreciation, the dark sheen of her hair, the energetic swing of her shoulders—a small girl with a large fund of good, solid horse sense. A girl who was dying of curiosity, yet knew enough not to pester a man with questions when he didn't feel like talking.

"I'll tell you all about it after I get some coffee in my system," he said.

"No hurry."

"I'll tell you this much now. I just kicked away my last chance for a bucketful of Devoe's money."

"Yeah?" She stopped grinding coffee. "You mean it's thumbs down on Alice?"

"Something like that."

"Why?" Her voice was flat. She turned and stared at him, holding the coffee grinder by its handle.

He grinned at her. "Because," he said, "I've discovered that I want something more than I do money. Mostly, I want you."

"Me?" Her eyes opened wide. "Why, I—I . . . You're crazy!"

"No-o, I don't think so." He shook his head decisively. "Nope. I'm just beginning to get smart. From now on I'm giving Bob Devoe a little competition. How you like that idea?"

Her eyes squinted and her lip started to tremble.

"Hey!" he cried in alarm. "There's nothing to bawl about."

"I'm not bawling!" she retorted fiercely. "It's just that I . . . Oh! Oh!"

She burst into sobs and dropped the coffee grinder. She rushed at Severn and threw her arms around his neck.

"Hey!" he protested. "You're sputtering in my ear."

"I'm not! I'm laughing! I'm . . . Oh! Oh!"

He held her tight. He held her so tight that she was laughing and crying and gasping for breath all at the same time. It was a wonder she didn't strangle.

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BULLET BARGAIN

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Tom Mission thought he'd never see the day he would consider killing a man for money—till that day came

NOBODY paid any attention to Tom Mission unless trouble broke out, then he became the most important man in the Silver Bar. Every night he sat in the lookout's high chair, seeming half asleep, yet watching every move throughout the wide room. He was as much a part of the gambling hall's furnishings as the rou-

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lette wheels or the faro layouts.

He was paid ten dollars a night, and to fat Russ Faber, who paid him, he was the cheapest sort of insurance. In the past six months, Mission had disarmed fifty drunks who had been taken with the sudden notion to shoot up what was called the biggest Nevada gambling hall outside Virginia City. He had stopped several near shoot-outs, foiled two attempted hold-ups, and broken up a miners' riot that had threatened to wreck the place. Tom Mission could handle a gun, and he was quick-witted.

In his cold-blooded way, Faber was fond of the youngster. Often during the evening, boss and lookout would exchange smiling nods. But sometimes the fat man thought, That kid's smile gives me goose pimples.

Mission wasn't a kid. It was his yellow hair and fair skin that made him look boyish. And there was nothing wrong with his smile, unless it was a little sad. But neither Russ Faber nor anyone else could understand that. What the Silver Bar lookout thought about all those hours, all those nights, was his own business. If he had any other life when he left the gambling hall at two in the morning, it was his own secret. Tom Mission had no confidants.

This night, Mission was thinking, A heck of a way to make a living. He didn't like being perched there, dressed in black like a gambler, with a sixgun under his coat in a quick-draw spring-fitted shoulder holster. He grew sick of watching the men lining the mahogany bar and circling the gambling tables, waiting for something to happen for which his wits and his gun wouldn't be quick enough or steady enough.

But even when he hated the job the most, Tom thought of the money it paid him.

He earned twice as much as the muckers who worked in the mines around Belle City, and that was what interested him.

AN ARGUMENT broke out at the bar, grew noisy and threatened to explode into a brawl. One of the bartenders gave Tom a lifted eyebrow, but he was already off his chair and coming forward. The two cursing, shouting men were miners. They were thick-bodied and rocky-faced, and drunk; they were ugly and dangerous. Tom came between them. He was smiling.

"What's the trouble, friends?" he asked easily. "Something wrong with the drinks?" He didn't wait for an answer but signaled to the bartender. "Charlie, give these boys something better."

A new bottle was broken open and set out. Tom Mission poured two drinks.

"It's on the house, friends," he told the two suddenly quiet miners. "Take the bottle with you when you go out."

One of the pair, a burly, unshaven man, growled, "You putting us out dude?" His voice was ominous. He lifted his right hand slowly closed it into a huge fist. "If you're trying that on Tim and me—"

"Why should I try that," Mission asked, "so long as you don't disturb the rest of the customers? Come on, drink up."

He held his breath then, knowing the pair might jump him as quickly as they had stopped cursing each other. He lifted his right hand and fingered the lapel of his coat, ready to grab for his gun. But the free drinks on the bar were bait, and the miners took it.

Mission eased himself away. Russ Faber met him near one of the roulette tables.

"Nice, the way you handled them, Tom."

"Those boys are easy to figure," Mission told him, and went on to his chair at the front of the long room.

Russ Faber always maintained that he would never run an all-night place; two o'clock was his closing time, and it was a rule he followed religiously. Promptly at two, the long bar and the

gambling layouts shut down. Sometimes men with a thirst or intent on bucking the tiger objected to the fat man's firm policy. Tonight a man who'd been winning at roulette drew a six-gun on the croupier.

"We'll just keep the wheel spinning until my luck changes!" he growled.

The croupier eyed the leveled gun. "Suit yourself," he said, then flicked Mission a glance.

The man with the winning streak of luck was a bearded freighter. He was flushed with luck and high on whisky. Catching the croupier's signal, he whirled toward the approaching lookout.

"Keep out of this, you—"

"The house is closed, friend."

"Not this wheel. I'll gun down the son who meddles with my luck!"

"That's me, then," Mission said, and his hand was inside his coat. He was already moving too swiftly for the hardcase's whiskey-blurred eyes to follow.

Mission's left hand grabbed a chair from a faro table, as his right hand drew the gun. He heaved a chair at the freighter's legs, flung himself to the left so that the other man had to swing his gun after him.

Both guns roared, and the hardcase let out a wild yell. The heavy .45 dropped to the floor. Mission stepped forward and kicked it under the roulette layout. He thrust his light .38 back into its trick holster.

"You better go see Doc Harmon, friend."

"I'll get you! I'll get you, sure as my name's Matt Hagarthy!"

"Sleep on it first, Hagarthy."

Matt Hagarthy's right arm was dripping blood onto the floor. He hugged it to his belly, cursing Tom Mission all the time. Then he started for the door, suddenly looking sick. Mission turned to the croupier.

"Count up his winnings. He'll be back for his money tomorrow."

"He'll be back for your hide," the croupier said, but nodded.

Mission put on his hat. He shook his head when Russ Faber stopped him.

"Better have a drink, Tom."

He shook his head, too, when one of the percentage girls smiled at him invitingly. He left the all but deserted place, paused on the plank sidewalk outside to button his coat.

THE night was chill, but mostly Tom Mission was cold inside. He kept thinking of Matt Hagarthy. He hadn't wanted to shoot the man.

A match flared at the corner of the building. Mission saw a pudgy face, a pair of metallic eyes, a cigar jutting from a thin-lipped mouth. The match flame went out, and the cigar glowed brightly.

The smoker said, "A word with you, Tom."

Mission moved along the plank walk. "What's on your mind, Bateman?"

"You sure can handle a gun, friend."

"So?"

"That Hagarthy had you dead-center, yet you got him."

Mission frowned. He didn't want to stand there listening to insincere praise from Chris Bateman. But the pudgy man was a mine owner and one of the Silver Bar's best customers, so rated a hearing. Bateman puffed on his cigar, taking his time.

"How would you like to earn yourself five thousand dollars, friend?"

"Doing what?"

"I'm in a jam," Bateman said, low-voiced. "I own the Gay Widow Mine outright, but a couple years ago I was prospecting with a pardner. We had a fall-out, me and my pardner, so he's got no claim on me. But I had a letter from him. He claims our pardner-ship still stands and he figures I've got to cut him in on my Gay Widow. He'll get here to Belle City on tomorrow's stage. You understand?"

"No."

"Well, it's like this," Bateman explained. "Stace Maddox is a bad one, a tough customer. If I refuse to take him on as a pardner he'll kill me. He's like that Hagarthy—runs wild when anybody crosses him up. Now I figure, Tom boy, that I could string him along for a couple of hours. I'll make him think we're still pardners. In the evening, I'll tell him we'll celebrate by having a party at the Silver Bar. Once I've got him there, I'll tell him the truth—that he and I are washed up. Maddox will be sure to grab for his gun."

"And you want me to kill him for you?"

"It's him or me," Bateman said, a whine in his voice. "And I'm no gunfighter. It'd be your job, Tom. You're paid to protect the Silver Bar's customers. And afterwards I'll hand you five thousand dollars. You'll do it, friend?"

Mission stared at the pudgy little man and didn't answer.

Bateman said hastily, "Think it over. When you see Maddox, you'll understand why I'm scared."

"All right, I'll think it over," Mission said sourly, and turned away.

Belle City was an ugly hodge-podge of frame buildings and plank shacks jammed together in narrow Lode Gulch. Tom Mission left the town behind. He walked along a foothills road, once out of the gulch, then turned into a meadow-like hollow between hills less barren than most of the Washoes. There was sage and greasewood on the hills. Mission's stride lengthened when he saw the lighted windows of his cabin. This was his life that no one at the Silver Bar knew about.

He had built the cabin with his own two hands, and he was proud of the three-room place. He was smiling when he opened the door and stepped into the small but homey parlor. The Mexican woman dozing in the rocker woke with a start. "*Buenas noches*, Señor Tom," she said.

Very softly, Mission asked, "How is she, Maria?"

"The same, señor. She ees sleeping now."

The woman rose and wrapped a shawl about her shoulders, moved to the door. With her man, she lived in a shack at the far end of the hollow. Mission hired her to look out for his wife each evening.

When she was gone, he tiptoed into the bedroom. In the darkness, he sat down beside his wife's bed. Clara always slept so quietly that sometimes it frightened him. But she stirred now and drowsily whispered:

"Tom, is that you?"

He reached for her hand; it was small, and too thin. He heard her sigh, as with relief, but she did not wholly wake. He sat there quietly, full of love for his wife and hatred for himself. He blamed himself for Clara's illness, and yet there was nothing he—nor Doc Harmon—could do to make her well.

HE AND Clara had been man and wife for more than a year, and all the luck they'd had was bad. Tom had brought his wife to Belle City in the hope that he would make a strike and be able to give her all the things a man wanted to give his wife. But it hadn't worked out. He had filed several claims and they hadn't paid off; when his savings were gone, he'd taken a job in the Gay Widow at four dollars a day. The second week, he'd been caught in a cave-in that had laid him up for ten days.

He hadn't gone back to the mine. Instead, hearing that the lookout at the Silver Bar had been killed, he applied for that job. He had showed Russ Faber how he could handle a gun—a thing he had learned back in Texas—and he had landed the lookout job. That ten dollars a day had helped some, but then the baby had come, and had died, and Clara had been sick ever since.

Sitting there in the dark, holding his wife's hand, Tom Mission remem-

bered what Doc Harmon had said so often, "Something's worrying her. Maybe it's the baby's death, I don't know. But if she doesn't get over it—well, no medicine I can give her will help."

Tom thought, too, of his talk with Chris Bateman, of that five thousand dollars Bateman was offering him. And suddenly he wanted that money. He could use it to take Clara away from these bleak hills. She was from Frisco, a city girl, and perhaps it would help her to go back home. Bateman's money would set him up in some kind of business; he could start a hardware store, maybe, and earn a decent living.

He thought, All right, Bateman. I'll take care of Maddox for you.

In the morning, Mission got breakfast and straightened up the cabin. He got his wife into her flannel robe and slippers, lifted her from the bed. She laughed a little and put her thin arms about his neck.

"I'm not that sick, darling," she protested. "I can walk."

"Sure, you can. I just like doing this."

He carried her to the parlor, placed her in the rocker by the open door so that she could sit in the warm morning sun. He sat down in the doorway, filled and lighted his pipe. Clara talked a little, cheerfully at first, then drearily of the baby that had lived for but an hour. Mission tried in sudden panic to distract her.

"How would you like to go back to Frisco, Clara?"

"Alone?"

"Don't be frightened," he told her. "I'd go with you."

"Why, I'd like that," she said uncertainly. "But you—like it here, Tom. You hate big towns. You grew up on a ranch and—"

"I can get along anywhere."

"But the money?"

"I've got a deal on with Chris Bateman," Mission said cautiously. And was glad when he saw Doc Harmon's horse and buggy coming in from the road. He didn't want Clara to question him about Chris Bateman.

Doc Harmon was a young man and, for a mining camp, a good medico. But he knew more about gunshot wounds and mine accident cases than about a woman whose sickness was a thing of the mind or nerves. He tried hard, however, saying at once:

"You're looking much better, Mrs. Mission. My medicine must be good, after all."

But behind his cheerfulness, he was worried. He stayed and talked for nearly half an hour, then gave his patient some more medicine. When he went out to his rig, Mission walked along.

"How's Hagarthy's arm, Doc?"

"Not too bad. It's your wife I'm worried about."

"You think she's worse?"

"She's no better, Tom. She's too thin, too weak, too pale—and yet I'd gamble my diploma that her illness is really grief or worry."

"I'm going to take her away from here, Doc. You think that'll help?"

"It's worth a try," Doc Harmon replied and drove off.

Mission knew, then, that he had to go through with the deal Chris Bateman was offering him. He had little money saved; mining camp living costs, with every pound of food freighted in over the Sierras, took a man's money as fast as he earned it. That five thousand would set him up. So he told himself.

TOM had noticed that Clara was often worse in the evening when the Mexican woman came and he was about to leave for town. But tonight his wife seemed in better spirits than in many weeks. When he kissed her good-by she clung to him.

"We'll really leave her, Tom—honest?"

"I wouldn't lie to you, my sweet."

"I guess you wouldn't. But sometimes I think—"

"Think what?" he asked.

"That you like your job at the Silver Bar."

He looked at her with astonishment. "You think that?" he said. "Is that one of the things that's worrying you?"

"I keep thinking that some night you'll be killed, Tom."

That jarred him. He had told her that he was paid to keep order in the Silver Bar, but he'd never said there was danger to him in the job.

"If that's making you sick," he said, shaken, "forget it. This is my last night, Clara. I promise!"

He left her with Maria, then, and walked into town. He always timed himself so that he entered the Silver Bar promptly at six. A few men were at the bar, but none of the gambling layouts were operating. In another hour, however, the place would be crowded. The croupiers, faro dealers and dice-game operators were at their posts.

Mission went to the bar and ordered a drink, though he seldom felt the need of whisky. He gave a violent start when Russ Faber came up from behind and slapped him on the back. He swung around, all tight inside, and relaxed only on seeing that it was his fat boss.

"What's the matter, Tom? You're jumpy."

"Russ, can you get a man for my job?"

"Sure, but I don't want to," Faber said, frowning. "You and I hit it off. Why should I find somebody else?"

"I promised my wife that this would be my last night."

Faber looked surprised. "I heard talk you had a wife," he said. "I guess that's why you never deal yourself in when the percentage girls smile at you. How come I've never seen your wife around town?"

"She's sick, Russ. Doc Harmon says it's because of worry. She's had a lot to worry her, the past few months. One thing that's worried her is my holding down this job."

Faber nodded. "It's all right, though I hate to lose you."

Mission downed his drink, then lighted a cigar he bought at the bar. The crowd started coming, and the house girls circulated about to attach themselves to the men who appeared to have money to drink up or gamble away. There were men in from the diggings, muckers and powdermen and teamsters from the mines. Freighters came too, and some townsmen. The mineowners, the bonanza kings, arrived in groups, bringing friends and sometimes women. The drinking and gambling got under way.

Mission took his place on the lookout's chair, but he couldn't keep his mind on the job. His nerves were knotted up and he was tight inside, and he had the nagging suspicion that something was bound to go wrong. He couldn't make himself believe that Bateman's five thousand dollars would be so easily earned. He had luck at the start, however; the crowd tonight was quiet, and so far there were no distractions.

A little after eight o'clock, pudgy Chris Bateman arrived. The mine owner had Stace Maddox with him. At least, Mission guessed that Bateman's companion, a big tough-looking customer, was Maddox.

Bateman gave Mission a questioning look, and smiled twistedly when the lookout nodded. It was settled, then, with a look and a nod. Bateman would goad Maddox when the time was ripe, Maddox would go into a rage and grab out his gun, and Mission would kill him.

Murder, Tom Mission thought. No matter how you look at it, it's murder. He began to understand why he felt so tight inside.

Bateman played it right. He called up a couple of the painted women, led the way to a table at the rear of the room. A waiter went to take the foursome's order for drinks. Mission could see that Bateman wanted Maddox drunk and entangled with a woman before pulling his dirty scheme. The

pudgy man was shrewd, and he had guts. Bateman was gambling that the lookout's gun could cut Maddox down before Maddox could get him.

Tom studied Maddox, but he couldn't tell what sort of a man the stranger really was. He wore a shabby coat and a battered hat, and he had a scrubby beard; but in a mining camp most men looked no better.

MADDOX was a leathery-skinned man, with a beak of a nose, beady black eyes, and a trap-like mouth. He talked and laughed a lot, like a man swimming on the full crest of his luck. He drank a lot and pawed the percentage girl a little. He acted like a thousand other men in Belle City. But without a doubt he was tough, and might be a killer. He wore a holstered sixgun under his coat.

Russ Faber came from his office, saw Maddox, and went to the table. Faber and Maddox shook hands like old friends, slapped each other on the back, talked and laughed together before Faber broke away. Tom Mission frowned over that. Russ Faber was that friendly to few men, and Faber was careful in judging men.

Mission got off his chair and started toward Faber, then some warning clicked in his mind. He swung toward the doors and saw Matt Hagarthy stepping in. The bearded hardcase's right arm was bandaged and in a sling, but he now wore his gun with the butt facing front so he could grab it with his left hand. In Hagarthy's eyes was an ugly look.

Mission braced himself. "If you want a showdown, Hagarthy, I'll go outside with you," he said. "No need for us to mess up the Silver Bar because of a personal grudge."

Hagarthy growled, "Go chase yourself, dude," and went to the bar.

Tom waited a moment longer, but Hagarthy ignored him. He went after Russ Faber then, asked to talk to him in private. They went to the office.

"What's ailing you tonight, Tom?" the fat man asked.

"How well do you know Stace Maddox, Russ?"

"Better than I know most men," Faber said. "He's as good as they come. I was partners with him years back, in the freighting business. It was in Montana. I broke a leg on the job and Maddox looked out for me. I lost my money in a bad business deal, and he staked me. He just got in from Montana, where he has mining properties. He's richer now than any man in Belle City."

"What's his deal with Chris Bateman?"

"Bateman is his hired man," Faber said. Bateman tells everybody he owns the Gay Widow Mine, but he's only Maddox's superintendent. Between you and me, Tom, I'd say Bateman is a blackleg. He spends and gambles away more money than he collects in wages. No doubt he's doing a lot of highgrading at the Widow. If Maddox finds it out, Bateman is sure to lose his job. Why all the questions, Tom?"

"I just want to know what sort of a game Bateman is playing."

"Why do you care?"

"Bateman's out to get Maddox," the lookout said slowly. "He gave me a lying story about Maddox being a crook and killer, and he offered me five thousand dollars to kill Maddox. He's going to bait Maddox into pulling a gun on him. How, I don't know. But Chris Bateman is tricky. Then I'm supposed to kill Maddox—and make it look like I'm just holding down my job."

Faber muttered an oath. "You're not going through with it," he said flatly. "Stace Maddox is a friend of mine."

"Don't worry, Russ. Now that I know Maddox is all right, I'll let Bateman do his own dirty work." He went to the door, then paused and gave the fat man the best smile he could muster. "I guess you won't need to find another man for the job, Russ. With-

out that five-thousand-dollar stake, I won't be able to pull out of town right now."

He left the office and made his way past the gambling layouts to Bateman's table. He said, "Bateman, I found out the truth. The deal's off."

He saw Bateman's pudgy face stiffen with fear. He heard Maddox say, his voice thick with whisky:

"This dude scaring you, Chris? I'll take care of him for you!!"

Maddox came rearing up off his chair, upsetting it. A big hand grabbed Mission's lapel. For the first time in six months at the Silver Bar, Mission was caught off-guard. Maddox kneed him in the groin, then hit him at the base of the skull as pain bent him double. Tom went down in a heap, pain exploding in his head.

He heard loud cries, and Bateman yelling:

"Get out your gun, Stace! That dude's a killer!"

Dazed and hurt though he was, Mission saw how Bateman was working it. He was urging the half-drunk Maddox to draw his gun to defend himself, hoping that would make Tom draw and kill the man from Montana.

ROARING bedlam had broken out in the Silver Bar. Never having seen Tom Mission go down before, the crowd was swept by panic, and wild to get out of gun range. Mission got his own hands under himself and heaved upward. He kept his hands away from his body as he faced Maddox.

"No guns, Maddox!"

But Maddox had his sixgun out, and Bateman was yelling at him to shoot. Russ Faber was bawling somewhere, trying to restore order. And Matt Hagarthy's drunken voice sounded.

"Get him, dude—grab your gun and get him!" Hagarthy yelled. "That's what you're supposed to do, then I'm to plug you! See, dude? I finish you off for jumping me last night—and get a thousand dollars from Bateman."

Maddox said, "What's all this?" He was sobering up fast.

Tom looked wildly at Maddox, then at Chris Bateman. The pudgy little blackleg was shrinking away.

"So you figured I'd kill Maddox for you, then you'd save yourself four thousand dollars by having Hagarthy kill me for a thousand! You yellow skunk!!"

Tom went for his gun then, throwing down on Chris Bateman who, trapped by the wall, was drawing a derringer. The roar of the big-caliber pocket gun drowned out the crack of the .38 in Mission's fist. But even as he fired, Mission fell to the floor. He landed on his stomach, but flung himself over onto his back just as Hagarthy's sixgun blasted. Bringing his .38 to bear, Mission fired from where he lay. He heard Hagarthy scream, saw him drop his gun. Mission came to his feet, swung toward Maddox. But Russ Faber had got to the man from Montana and was yelling at him to put up his gun.

Maddox had sobered, but he was too surprised to do any shooting. He stared at Chris Bateman, and the wall no longer supported the pudgy little blackleg. He went down slowly, cursing, but it was clear that he was dying.

The bedlam let up, but gunsmoke was still thick in the place. Matt Hagarthy leaned limply against the bar, one arm in a sling and the other dangling loosely and dripping blood.

Fat Russ Faber said, "Get your hat and clear out, Tom. You're done here—for good!"

Mission stared at him dully, then turned and headed for the doors. One of the bartenders gave him his hat.

Mission didn't go home until the customary time, for he knew that his early arrival would make Clara wonder and ask questions. He hated to face her and admit that his big deal had been a bust.

He had less than two hundred dollars saved up; enough to get Clara and him to Frisco, and to get them a

room and meals for a couple of weeks, but not enough to start him off in any sort of business. As for a job—

He shook his head in despair.

He could get another job like the one he'd had at the Silver Bar—maybe. But Clara would start worrying about him all over again. He'd been a cowpuncher and a bronc buster in Texas, but such work didn't give a man enough money to support a wife in any sort of style. Tom Mission wasn't fitted for much else. He didn't know what he'd do.

But he went in smiling when he reached the cabin. It was a forced smile at first, then it became a real one. For tonight Clara was waiting for him. She had sent Maria home. She was wearing her best dress. She was still too pale, still so thin it made his heart ache. But she was smiling and her eyes were aglow. She knew she was on the way to recovery.

"I waited, Tommy," she whispered. "Because tonight's sort of special." Her eyes clouded briefly. "It is your last night at the Silver Bar?"

"My last night," Mission said and took her in his arms. . . .

In the morning, they began packing their things. They were cheerful about it, and he tried not to let his wife see that now he was worrying. Too, they were so busy about it they did not hear the approach of the horse and buggy until a shout lifted. They went to the door together, and fat Russ Faber and tough-looking Stace Maddox were getting from the rig. Mission stiffened, frowned.

FABER took off his hat on seeing Clara. "Now I understand why you quit your job, Tom." He was smiling. "I brought Stace along, Tom, because he's looking for a good man. I explained to him about the loco deal Chris Bateman tried to pull. He understands it all. He needs a new superintendent for his Gay Widow Mine—an honest one, this time—and I recommended you. It's a mighty good paying job, Tom with a big future."

Stace Maddox nodded. "How does it sound, my friend?"

Mission's face lighted up, then darkened again. He looked at his wife.

"Oh, take it, Tom!" she cried. "It's an opportunity!"

"But you didn't want to stay here."

"It doesn't matter now!" Clara told him. "It was that job! I'll be happy here with you, now that I don't have to worry every night!"

Tom Mission smiled and said, "Gentlemen, I accept."

He was a little surprised at the way Russ Faber stared at him. He couldn't know that it was the first time a smile of his hadn't made his ex-boss feel uneasy.

3 EXCITING ACTION NOVELS IN EVERY ISSUE 3

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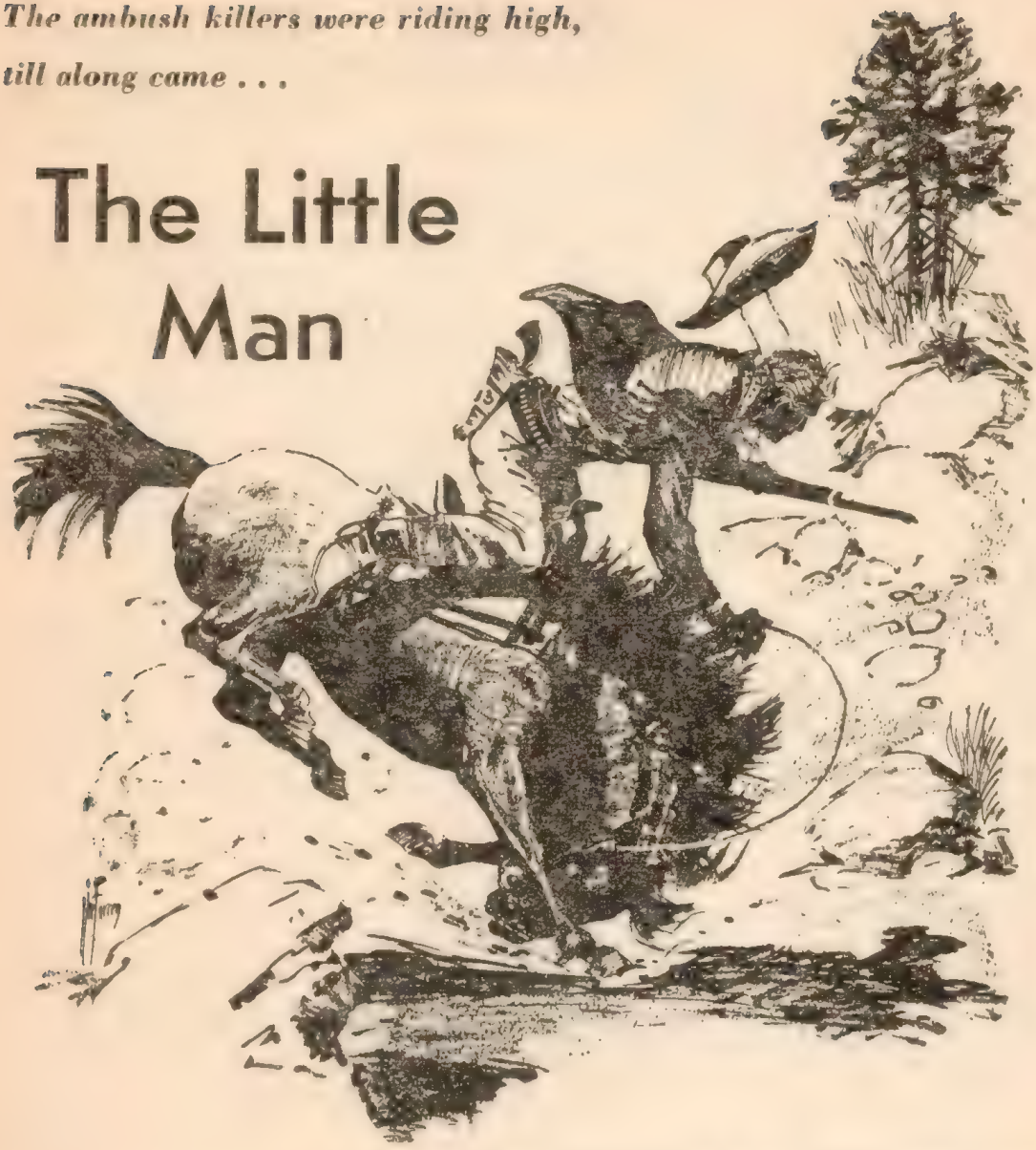
The ambush killers were riding high, till along came . . .

The Little Man



By WILLIAM HOPSON

HE CAME into Cornerville on the train, sitting there in the day coach as the puffing engine came groaningly to a stop. He pushed back the hard derby hat he wore above a forehead which though small, in keeping with his size, was intelligent-looking. He looked down at his button shoes and then rose, brushing the dust from his dark suit.

Passengers were getting up from their seats—women with fretting children, punchers who had smoked and laughed with big hats pushed far back on their heads and worn boots resting on the opposite cushions, and two men

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who obviously were big cattlemen.

They had been addressed as Mr. Blake and Mr. Lannifer. The seat back of them had been occupied by a swarthy, cadaverous-faced man of about forty-two, who was partly bald. He wore a droopy mustache of dark bristles, and he hadn't spoken a word to anybody.

Now, as the two cattlemen went down the aisle, the dour-looking man with the dark face and mustache got up and followed them.

"Who is he?" inquired the little man of the passenger beside him.

"His name is Hank Ballert. He's supposed to be a stock detective hired by Lanifer and Blake to stop nester rustling—of which there's plenty."

"I see," was the murmured reply. "And?"

The other, obviously a farmer himself, shot him a sideward glance. "Out here, mister, it's not healthy to ask or answer that question. But I'm going on up the valley anyhow, and maybe you won't talk. Ballert stops 'em—with a bullet in the back. I don't think either Blake or Lannifer wanted it that way when they hired him, but some of these nesters went hog wild, on stealing. So the two big fellows brought in a stock detective. He was found just four days later with a bullet-hole under a shoulder-blade. Them crooked nesters had too much at stake. But Ballert is a more cautious man. They haven't got him yet, and I doubt if they will."

The little man thanked him and rose to his five feet, four inches of height. He had to stand in the seat to bring down his drummer's sample case from overhead. It contained no samples. Nothing but a few toilet articles, a peculiar-looking seven-shot revolver, and sealed instructions.

He got off into the afternoon sunshine with the other passengers, and sized up the line of buildings eighty feet away that formed the opposite side of the street. The baggage man was unloading from the express car.

THE little man crossed over and took a room in the Hospitality House, a box-shaped, two-story structure that looked as though it would cave in during the first severe windstorm. He washed up from a pitcher of water poured into a clean porcelain basin, poured the soapy suds down the drain pipe to mingle with more of its kind in a stagnant pool out in the alley, and went downstairs to the bar next door. Not to drink for pleasure, but for information, and a bar was the best place to get it.

He ordered and the bartender stared at first, then smiled knowingly. Little men weren't supposed to drink double slugs with a beer chaser. This little man drank swiftly, ordered a second, drank that neat, and ordered a third. By now the dozen or so domino and pool players' eyes were watching him.

Another drummer getting pie-eyed the moment he got off the train. It had happened before.

A big, coarse-looking, sandy-haired man who had been drinking at the bar moved toward him, glass in hand.

"Howdy," he greeted. "How many more of them can you hold without falling flat on your face?"

"Quite a few," was the murmured reply. "I'm doing all right."

"Any man who can down 'em like that is doing all right. The name is Cass Lunders," he said, extending a huge hand. "I'm a nester, but some people say as how I might be something else. Maybe handy with a long loop."

"Cass, you're drunk," a nester in riding boots said sharply from a few feet farther along the bar.

Blake and Lannifer came in, followed by the taciturn Ballert, like a faithful dog at their heels. Lannifer was about fifty and a little heavy-set; Blake was sixty, lean and well-dressed and aloof. He looked capable and he looked all business, the kind who had neither the time nor the inclination to stop and pass the time of day. They drank brandies neat, went out, and

Lunders' eyes followed them with a sneer.

"Lannifer and Blake and their hired 'stock detective,' " he grunted. "Paid to keep us little fellers in line."

"I've heard many stories in my travels out here in the West," the little man said, not drinking any more now. "Some real badmen."

"Bad?" Lunders expanded, obviously trying to impress a dude drummer from the East. "Sure, we got 'em here. Men like Ballert there. Men like Blake, who lost a son in a gunfight. It's the gun on your hip, not your size that counts out here, mister. Let me tell you about one little squirt of a nester kid we had out here a good many years ago. Name was Kurt Saleen and he wasn't much more'n fifteen. They were homesteading the place just north of mine. He had a purty sister of about seventeen that Blake's boy, who was a sort of handsome lady killer, went for. When he wouldn't marry the girl like he'd promised her, this nester squirt, no bigger'n a prairie dog hole, gut-shot him three times. Killed him dead. Hit for the bad country and turned outlaw. "Hey," he called over his shoulder, "how many men did this Saleen kid kill before he was reported got by the law down in Texas? Twelve or thirteen?"

"Only four, Cass, and you're drunk," came the reply. "Stop scaring that little feller with these wild yarns."

"Oh, no, I'm very much interested," the little man replied. "Very much. And thank you."

He finished his drink and went out the door in the face of loud and knowing laughter. Cass Landers turned, grinning lazily.

"We got to have something around here for amusement, don't we? He'll go back East and tell all his dude friends about the badmen of the West."

The little man had gone back to his room in the hotel. He opened the bag, removed the seven-shot revolver, slipped it into his pocket, and slit the sealed envelope.

FIVE minutes later he was at the local liver, renting a rig.

"Farnsworth?" the hostler asked, in answer to an inquiry. "Sure, I know him. Farmer. Lives just north of town. You take this road here—" and he finished with instructions about side roads.

The little man murmured his thanks and drove off in the rig, sitting erect in the seat. Once out of town he relaxed and leaned back, putting a foot up against the dashboard. Something in his manner said that he'd handled a team before. A lot of teams.

It was dark when he passed Cas Lunders' place. He saw the outlines of the low building and he saw the outlines of cattle grazing on nearly three hundred acres of lush grassland. For a man who owned two half sections in Wyoming, Cass wasn't doing much farming.

The driver of the righ came to the turn-off road to Farnsworth's place, but did not take it. He drove on northward for another mile and finally pulled before several low buildings, all dark. He sat there for a minute, and some kind of a thickness came into his throat. He got down and boldly forced his way into the front room of the main house.

It wasn't much changed, except for the furniture—a bachelor's furniture. An envelope on a table caught his eye and he saw the name "Hank Ballert" written on it. The little man didn't open the envelope and explore its contents. He looked at the floor by the front door, where he had shot down Blake's son that day ten years ago. But the stains were gone, wiped out by the passing of time.

So Ballert now lived in the old home, next door to the "farm" owned by Cass Lunders.

The little man got in the rig, drove back down the road again for two miles and turned off at the side road

leading to Farnsworth's place. The main house had been cut from hewed pine and fir logs, a low, square edifice erected for comfort. Back of it was the barn, a shed for farm implements, and a milk pen.

The visitor saw the lights shining yellowly from front windows and hallooed the house. The door opened and a stolid-looking man with a dusty-colored beard opened it wider and stuck out his head. Cautiously.

"Yeah?" he yelled. "Come on in." Abruptly he closed the door again.

The little man wrapped the lines around the right front hub in such a manner that if the team moved forward the bits would tighten in their mouths, and stepped upon the low gallery.

"Farnsworth?" he called.

The door opened again with the bearded face in view. It was back of a cocked six-shooter.

"Introductions first," the man holding it warned coldly.

"I am," the little man said, "from the Pfieffer Detective Agency, in Kansas City. I have read the letter you wrote to our agency, asking for help."

The nester lowered the six-shooter. He nodded and closed the door as the visitor stepped inside. It was a big, comfortably furnished room. Back of a curtained doorway showed a light, where the "womenfolks" apparently had discreetly retired.

"Have a chair," the farmer invited. He placed the six-shooter on a low table beside his own chair, and went to a cupboard, returning with a demijohn and glasses.

The curtains parted and a young girl came in. She was not a day over seventeen, and her small size made her look about fourteen. She had pitch-black hair and eyes, in contrast to her father's sandy complexion, the hair in dark twin braids wrapped ropelike, around her small head.

SHE also possessed a precociousness that belied her appearance. She didn't weigh a pound over ninety-five. She looked first at her father, then at the visitor. Going to the demijohn, she took it from her father's hands, and poured.

"I've been listening," she informed them blandly. "I had my ear right against the curtain. I heard everything." She looked at the little man again.

"My daughter, Lenore," Farnsworth grunted sourly. "She thinks she's all growed up and tries to run the blasted place."

The little man started to murmur a greeting, but she cut him short. "I know just how you feel. Everybody thinks I'm a baby because I'm so little, too. But don't get mad at them. We small people get used to it. So," she went on soothingly, "I'll give you just a wee bit so's you can let papa think you're a full grown man."

"Go back with the womenfolk, where you belong," her farmer half-yelled at her.

"If there's a plentiful supply," the little man murmured, "I'll take a tumblerful. It helps me to talk."

She poured him a tumblerful and then looked down patronizingly. "It's quite all right," she assured him. "I try to make 'em know I'm grown up, too. When you fall on your face we'll fix you up with a place to sleep."

"If you'll come back in five minutes," the visitor informed her, "I'll stand on my hands to prove to a baby that I'm not drunk."

"Get back with the womenfolk," Farnsworth roared at his daughter.

She went, smiling back at them over her young shoulder. "In five minutes," she said. "And I'll be listening back of the curtain."

"Don't know what I'm going to do with her," grunted the farmer, reaching for his drink. "All growed up at seventeen—"

"The details," cut in the detective. "As I said, I read your letters."

Farnsworth looked over at him. "Maybe your small size is deceiving,"

he said bluntly. "I hope so. So you want details. All right, here goes: Blake and Lannifer are the two big cattlemen in this stretch of Wyoming, with all the range they need. They didn't mind the settlers coming in, knowing that settlers make for a solid prosperous farming and cowtown. They didn't even mind when some of the nesters began butchering a stray now and then to feed their families. But some of these nesters like Cass Lunders and a few others began to get ideas about becoming big cattlemen overnight.

"It takes years to build up a big spread, and Cass and his friends, they're not the kind to wait that long. So they started rustling Blake and Lannifer's cattle on a big scale. That was all right with us honest nesters. It was none of our business, so long as *we* played the game square."

"I see." The little man nodded. "And perhaps I can furnish a few more of the details. Blake and Lannifer had to do something, so they hired a stock detective. He was shot in the back within four days, according to Cass Lunders. Then they brought in a man named Hank Ballert, who to date has killed several rustling nesters. You can go on from there."

FARNSWORTH was staring at him in astonishment.

"Mister, you certainly do get around," he finally admitted. "I'll go on from there. As long as Ballert was putting thieving nesters out of the way, we didn't mind. A thief is a thief, no matter who or what he is. But Ballert must have got kind of ambitious to hold down his job, or maybe he made mistakes. Anyhow, he killed two men who were honest, hard-working farmers grazing a few head they'd b*ought*. I don't know whether Blake and Lannifer were responsible, making him put the fear of God into the rest of us, or whether Ballert took it upon himself to do that."

"How do you know he was the killer?"

"Easy. Ballert chews tobacco all the time. Every one of the six dead men, four thieves and two innocent men, were lying near a rock on which was a big tobacco splash. It's Ballert's trademark, to let the nesters know who did it. So we got worried, got together, and I wrote the letter to your agency, asking for help."

The little man was toying with his glass. "I see," he said again softly. "You wanted not a detective, but a killer."

"Not at all, mister! We wanted a detective to find evidence against Ballert, and the rest of those thieving nesters besides. Most juries out here are made up of farmers. Just get us proof on Ballert, and any of these thieving nesters, and we'll do the rest in a jury room. That's why the committee got me to write you."

The curtains had parted again. Lenore came back, looked at the empty glass.

"You're going to get drunk," she admonished, shaking a condescending finger in his face. "Oh, you poor little detective! Trying to show Papa what a big man you are."

He rose to his feet, ignored her. She went over and ruffled her father's hair and beard, looking at the visitor. Farnsworth threw off the gestures, in them a certain amount of anger, indignation—and affection.

"He's such a little man, isn't he, Papa?" she said.

"I'll be going now," the visitor said, moving toward the door. He paused, hand on the handle. "I'll keep you informed of my investigations. Meanwhile, you are not to disclose my visit here, unless asked. The liveryman will probably tell the folks in town. If asked any questions, you will reply that I'm selling farm plows and came to see you for that purpose."

He went out to the buggy and the square of light from the door followed

him. Lenore followed him to the porch, with her father.

"You forgot your promise," she called, and there was the white shine of her teeth as she laughed at him.

He dutifully placed the contents of his pockets in the seat of the open-topped rig, all except the gun, and stood on his hands. As his legs went up in the air, a shot roared from the north corner of the house. As it roared, the seven-shot pistol he'd forgotten fell to the ground beside him.

He moved then like a cat. He fell flat and that gun began to bark faster than Farnsworth ever thought a gun could shoot. It spat five flame lashes toward the darkened corner of the house. There was a yell, the sound of running boots, then of horses loping away. The little man got up, brushing himself off.

"I'm afraid they've found out," he said, almost sadly. "I had hoped to keep my business here a secret. Keep inside, Farnsworth, and keep a gun handy. If you work the fields, stay clear of timber that might afford ambush for a rifleman. Keep your gun with you at all times. I have some investigating to do."

He drove down the road again, what they called a lane because it was between two rows of barbed wire fence. He came into the main road, swung south, and let the team drop to a walk. He was glad they were equipped with leather tugs instead of trace chains. Tugs might squeak but they didn't rattle.

HE DROVE slowly and cautiously along the road until, off to one side, he saw Cass Lunders' house in the night. The square of light in a window hadn't been there when the little man passed on his way out of town. He pulled the team off the road, tied the horses to a fence post, and melted into the night toward the square of light.

The sod house finally loomed up, and he thought Cass must be pretty dumb or pretty sure of himself not to have a good, leather-lunged dog around.

Cass was inside, stripped to the waist. His left arm was bloody. He was trying to wash a great hairy forearm with cold water, cursing as he dabbed at the skin-deep slash across it.

In lining his right hand around the corner of the building at Farnsworth's place, to take a shot at the strange little man who'd just elevated his legs in the air, he'd had to expose most of his body. One of the five quickly fired shots had taken effect.

Cass was still cursing.

The little man waited, remembering all the cattle he'd seen grazing on Cass' pasture and also the other cattle he'd seen on the old Saleen homestead land, just to the north.

There were two riders, he told himself outside the window. I burned one of them. I think I know who the other is.

He waited, watching Cass bandage the arm with strips torn from a flour sack. He was hoping that another man would come out of one of the other rooms. The other man didn't.

He had turned to go when from somewhere out in the night he again heard the sound of a running horse—one, this time. The little man turned and sprinted back toward his rig.

Lenore had seen the team and rig tied to the fence post, and was waiting. She rode a broken-down pony, bareback.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Father!" she cried. "Hank Ballert came back. He must have been one of the men who shot at you. He got the drop on Papa and took him away. I was hunting for you!"

He jumped up into the seat of the rig and she slid to the ground, looking a lot older and more capable now. The bit slipped out of her pony's mouth and she was up beside him.

"Do something!" she cried. "Hank Ballert's taken Papa away!"

"You're excited," he said.

"Of course I am, you dunderhead —you pitifully little man! Do *something*!"

"Ballert," he said, "is a killer. A man who shoots people in the back. If he took your father away, there's time."

She almost struck at him with small fists. "Oh, you—you! You're supposed to be a detective. Can't you do something! What are you going to do now?"

"Sit here," he said, "and wait. I wish I could roll a cigarette, but Lunders would see the light of the match."

"After you left," she half-whispered, "there was a knock at the door. Papa opened it, but Ballert knocked the gun out of his hand and covered him. He made him saddle a horse, and took him away. I ran out and jumped on my pony to try and overtake you."

"And then you saw the rig tied in the lane," he interrupted her. "Don't you see how simple it is, child?"

She forgot her fears long enough to shoot him a glance with fire in it, even in the darkness. "I'm not a child," she said indignantly. "I'm seventeen, and I'm almost as big as you —Kurt Saleen!"

"So you know?" he asked, with a softness he hadn't realized was in his makeup.

LENORE said airily, "Of course, you—you little lummox! When Papa wrote the agency he asked for a man who knew this country, an experienced man who could cope with this situation. They said they'd send out such a man. Then *you* showed up, wrapping a pair of lines around a wheel hub like no dude Eastern detective would ever do. I noticed the slight drawl in your words and how small you are, and I remembered all the stories about Kurt Saleen, the nester squirt who had killed Blake's son over his sister. I put two and two together and made a good guess. Could I ask what ever became of your sister?"

He looked off into the night. A horse had been mounted down by Cass Lunders' cabin and was loping northward. The little man took up the lines.

"We'd better be going," he said.

He swung the team around in a slow walk, careful not to let the horses make any unnecessary noise. The loping hoofbeats were fading away into the night, northward.

"There were two of them," he said, "who shot at me. At least two were present because there were two running horses. They missed, and I wounded one. Cass Lunders."

"Of course," she got out in a low voice. "And if Hank Ballert came to the house and took Papa away, he was the other."

"Yes," the little man said. "It adds up. It adds up to Cass Lunders being a pardner to Hank Ballert. Cass rustles with a free hand while Ballert, living on the old Saleen homestead, puts the fear of God into the rest of the nesters, both rustlers and the innocent. It adds up."

They went northward along the road, passed the side road leading off to the Farnsworth farm, and Lenore Farnsworth sat in silence beside him. He finally broke the silence.

"About the old Saleen homestead —who owns it now?" he asked.

"Nobody that we know of. After this, Kurt—after you killed Blake's son the family pulled up stakes and left the country. Nobody knew where they went. The girl——"

"She's married and has three children," he cut in almost harshly.

"She—they left and the place lay vacant for a couple of years. Then a Missouri family moved in, homesteaded it, and didn't stay. It's been that way ever since, according to what people say. So last week I got a letter from the Land Office about one I'd written. They said Hank Ballert was now homesteading the old

Saleen place."

"In pardners with Cass Lunders, on the side," he said grimly, and whipped the team into a faster pace.

It was still dark when they arrived at the old Saleen place, and not a sign of light showed from the buildings. The little man got down and Lenore got right down beside him.

"I'm going with you," she whispered in a determined voice.

"You stay right here," he ordered.

"You just *try* to give me orders, Kurt Saleen," she came back fiercely. "If Papa can't do it, neither can you, you—*squirt.*"

He moved through the night and together they came up on the porch, stepping softly. The seven-shot revolver, with two cartridges remaining, nestled in the right hand pocket of his coat. They could hear voices from within. And they could see the saddled horses tied out by the evergreen trees a short distance away. They listened.

They heard Blake speaking, harshly, angrily.

"What the devil's the meaning of all this, Ballert? What do you mean, having us meet you out here on something 'important'? You've been acting strange lately. You shot two nesters you know weren't thieves. What's Farnsworth doing here? I want an explanation, and I want it quick."

"You'll get it," came Lunders' sneering voice. "This is a showdown and a payoff. Hank and me make the showdown and you pay off, or you're ruined."

THE little man and the girl with him were at the window now. But the blanket covering it had a hole burned in it—probably some man had gone to sleep with a cigarette between his fingers—and the two could see into the room.

Blake sat at the crude table, Lannifer beside him. Lannifer looked worried; the other cattleman's face showed repressed cold fury. Farnsworth, apparently unharmed, sat on a soiled bunk where Ballert obviously slept nights. The "stock detective" and Cass Lunders faced the ranchers. A bandage around the bigger man's arm was a reminder of where Kurt Saleen had shot him.

"Get it off your chest," Blake harshly ordered Ballert.

"All right, Blake," came the half-grunted reply. "You hired me to put the fear of God into these thieving nesters. I did. You might have hired me as a stock detective, but you and Lannifer knew I was hired to exterminate, knowing how hard it is to convict a nester with a nester jury in the box. So I did your dirty work. I followed like a dog at your heels, because that's what you and Lannifer figured I was—and about on the same level.

"I saw Cass Lunders getting rich fast by long looping your cattle and I realized he was a practical man. I went pardners with him, homesteading this place not long ago. I shot them two honest nesters to make you uneasy, and make certain that you two would come into line or hang with me, since I was under your orders."

"Orders, my foot!" snapped Lannifer. "We never gave you any orders to kill honest men."

Ballert grinned at him from back of his droopy black mustache. "A jury'll think different," he sneered. "If I swing, you two either swing or go to the penitentiary. You'd be ruined, regardless."

"What's Farnsworth here got to do with it?" demanded Blake, obviously shaken.

"Nothing at all—at least not until the livery man in town told about that little squirt of a drummer renting a rig to come out to Farnsworth's place. I've been hearing a lot of reports that maybe the nesters would bring in a man of their own. I even heard reports—maybe just gossip and maybe not—that when I got the nes-

ters in line you two boys just *might* be sending for another detective to get *me* out of the way without risk to you and your precious reputations. A man in my business has to think of things like that, you know."

"Yep," put in Lunders, grinning. "That's right. So I began hanging around town to keep a eye on strangers, and today this little gent showed up. I talked to him, then follered him when he left town. I got Hank with me and we went to Farnsworth's house. But what really got me was that this little gent first come straight *here*. Right into this room. The same room where Kurt Saleen killed your son years ago."

"It was a little nester squirt that shot your son, Blake," Lunders went on. "This little stranger comes straight to this house where it happened. Then he goes to Farnworth's farm and talks. Then it all comes clear. Kurt Saleen, the nester kid who killed your son, is back here as a detective for the nesters, and maybe —just maybe—to finish up the job on you because you was too proud to let your son marry that girl. You ordered him not to, and I guess the worthless young pup wouldn't have done it anyhow."

Something like a hard breath of wind went out of Blake's lungs. "I see," he got out slowly. "But that doesn't explain Farnsworth's presence here."

"That's an easy one," Ballert snorted. "He's the man who wrote for this little killer to come out here and get *me* for killing nesters. So I got that score to settle with him. I'm going to settle it in just about two minutes—with you two present. I'm implicating you in a nester murder. But if you keep quiet, and pay what Cass and me are asking, nobody will ever know you and Cass were here. I'll take full responsibility for the killing, like I done for the others."

"Get on with it," snapped Lannifer. "You've got a price?"

CASS nodded. "And not too much for you two to pay. That price for keeping you two out of this is a free hand with a long loop on your cattle to build up our spread for two years. You can afford it. Both of you has got thousands and thousands of cattle. We only need a few hundred calves and mavericks to set us up in business. Hank can go right along keeping the nester scum in line, I'll handle the cattle end, and you two get off easy and safe—or you get run out of the country when Hank tells his story. Well?"

Blake took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead, then brushed it down across his mustache. He looked at Lannifer.

"No, by hell!" shouted Lannifer. "I won't be blackmailed by any boot-licking dog of a hired killer! We paid you well and, by tunket, we'll run you out of the country! You can't hurt us here. Well, maybe you could hurt us, but you couldn't wreck us. Now do your worst!"

"All right," grunted Hank Ballert. "If that's the way you want it. Looks like Cass and me might have to skedaddle out to another section of the country and try our scheme there, but we'll fix you before we go. Farnsworth, you got about a minute left to live. You shouldn't of wrote that letter. You should of 'tended to your own business."

He had slid the heavy pistol from its sheath at his right hip. Lannifer had half-risen. Blake seemed torn between indecision and confusion. It was then that the door snapped inward on its hinges and in a flash the little man stood there, the peculiar seven-shot pistol in his hand.

"I'm taking care of Farnsworth's business, Mr. Ballert," he murmured as the killer whirled.

Ballert's pistol started to lift and a sharp explosion popped out in the room. The bullet caught Ballert squarely through the Adam's apple. The gun swung in the face of Lun-

ders' draw and the second shot shattered the big man's temple.

He stood there, looking meek in his derby hat and button shoes, almost on the spot where he had killed Blake's son so many years before.

"I should have a grudge against you," he said to Blake, "but it was settled years ago when I killed your son for wronging my sister."

"I know," the cattleman nodded. "His blood was spilled right where you are now. If it will make you feel any better, he wanted to marry her. My pride and arrogance wouldn't permit it. Like so many fathers, I thought there was no woman in the world good enough for an only son and heir—that particularly a nester wasn't. I've paid for that a thousand times over. And now I'm paying again. I'm going to make amends to the families of the two honest men Ballert murdered against my orders. It's the least I can do. And I'll tell the rest of them the truth—that from now on no honest man will have anything to fear from us. We'll let the law take care of the crooked ones."

He got up, sighed heavily, and went out, followed by Lannifer. The girl had gone to her father. Farnsworth got up, came over, and shook hands. He was still very much shaken.

"It's taken a good many years for you to square up here in the home where you once squared another account. If there's anything I can ever do—but, shucks, I guess you'll be going out on the train again."

"Don't let him go, Papa!" his daughter whispered fiercely. "He's so little—and little men don't come to our place every day. He could resign that awful job and get rid of those awful clothes and homestead his old home again. Of course, he'd have to have some help from us. He's so little—"

"Shut up, you witch," her father said, though he was smiling through his beard as he looked at the little man. "Well, Kurt?"

"Well," Kurt Saleen said softly, looking into the bright eyes of the diminutive figure beside Farnsworth, "why not?"

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DUTCHMAN'S FLAT

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

Six purposeful men follow telltale tracks on a lynch trail

THE dust of Dutchman's Flat had settled in a gray film upon faces, and Ben Neill could see the streaks made by the sweat on cheeks and brows, and knew his own must be the same. No man of them was smiling and they rode with their rifles in their hands, six grim and purposeful men upon the trail of a single rider.

They were men shaped and tempered to the harsh ways of a harsh land, strong in their sense of justice, ruthless in their demand for punishment, relentless in pursuit. From the desert they had carved their homes, and from the desert they drew their courage and their code—and the desert knows no mercy.

Copyright, 1948, by Best Publications, Inc., and originally published in Fall, 1948, Giant Western

"Where's he heading, you reckon?"

"Home, most likely. He'll need grub and a rifle. He's been living on the old Sorenson place."

A posseman named Kimmel spat. "He's welcome to it. That place starved out four men I know of." He stared at the hoof track ahead. "He's got a good horse. Big buckskin. Reckon we'll catch him, Hardin?"

The man called Hardin said, "Sure. Not this side of his place, though. There ain't no shortcuts we can take to head him off, and he's pointing for home straight as a horse can travel."

"Ain't trying to cover his trail none," observed another.

"No use trying." Hardin squinted his eyes against the glare of the sun. "He knows we figure he'll head for his ranch."

"He's no tenderfoot." Kesney, another rider, expressed the thought that had been dawning upon them all in the last two hours. "He knows how to save a horse, and he knows a trail."

They rode on in near silence. Hardin scratched his unshaven jaw. The dust lifted from the hoofs of the horses as they weaved their way through the catclaw and mesquite.

It was a parched and sun-baked land, with only dancing heat waves and the blue distance of the mountains to draw them on. The trail they followed led straight as a man could ride across the country. Only at draws or nests of rocks did it swerve, where they noticed the rider always gave his horse the best of it.

NO RIDER of the desert need actually see a man to know him, for it is enough to follow his trail. In these things are the ways of a man made plain, his kindness or cruelty, his ignorance or cunning, his strength and his weakness. There are indications that cannot escape a man who has followed trails; and in the two hours since they had ridden out of Freedom Town the six had already learned much of the man they followed. And they meant to learn more.

"What started it?"

The words sounded empty and alone in the vast stillness of the basin.

Hardin turned his head slightly so his words could drift back. It was the manner of a man who rides much in the wind or rain. He shifted the rifle to his left hand and wiped his sweaty right palm on his coarse pants leg.

"Some loose talk. He was in the Bon Ton buying grub and such. Johnny Webb said something, the feller got mad, and they had some words. Johnny was wearing a gun, but this Lock hombre wasn't, so he gets him a gun and goes over to the Longhorn. He pushes open the door and shoots Johnny twice through the body. In the back." Hardin spat. "He fired a third shot, but that missed Johnny and busted a bottle of whisky."

There was a moment's silence while the possemen digested this, then young Neill looked up.

"We lynching him for the killing, or for busting the whisky?"

It was a good question, but it drew no reply. The dignity of the five other riders was not to be shattered by humor. They were riders on a mission. Neill let his eyes drift over the dusty copper of the desert. He had no liking for the idea of lynching any man, and he did not know the squatter from the Sorenson place. Living there should be punishment enough for any man. Besides—

"Who saw the shooting?" he asked.

"Nobody seen it, actually. All anybody knows he never gave Johnny a fair shake. Sam was behind the bar, but he was down to the other end, and it happened too fast for him to see."

"What's his name? Somebody call him Lock?" Neill asked.

There was something incongruous in lynching a man whose name you did not know. He shifted in the saddle, squinting his eyes toward the distant lakes dancing in the mirage of heat waves.

"What's the matter? Lock, his name is. Chat Lock."

"Funny name."

The comment drew no response. The dust was thicker now and Neill pulled his bandanna over his nose and mouth. His eyes were drawn back to the distant blue of the lakes. They were enticingly cool and beautiful, lying across the way ahead and in the basin off to the right. This was the mirage that lured many a man from his trail to pursue the always retreating shoreline of the lake. It looked like water; it really did.

Maybe there was water in the heat waves. Maybe if a man knew how, he could extract it and drink. The thought drew Neill's hand to his canteen, but he took it away without drinking. The slosh of water in the canteen was no longer enticing, for it was warm, brackish, and unsatisfying.

"You know Lock, Kimmel?" Kesney asked. He was a wiry little man, hard as a whipstock, with bits of sharp steel for eyes, and brown muscle-corded hands. "I wouldn't know him if I saw him."

"Sure I know him. Big fellow, strong made, rusty-like hair and maybe forty years old. Looks plumb salty, too, and from what I hear, he's no friendly sort of man. Squatting on that Sorenson place looks plumb suspicious, for no man can make him a living on that dry-as-bone place. No fit place for man nor beast. Everybody figures no honest man would squat on such a place."

IT SEEMED a strange thing, to be searching out a man whom none of them knew. Of course, they had all known Johnny Webb. He had been a handsome, popular young man, a daredevil and a hellion, but an attractive one, and a top-hand to boot. They had all known him and had all liked him. Then, one of the things that made them so sure that this had been a wrong killing, even aside from the shots in the back, was the fact that Johnny Webb had been the fastest man in the Spring Valley country. Fast and a dead shot.

Johnny had worked with all these men, and they were good men, hard men but good. Kimmel, Hardin, and Kesney had all made something of their ranches, as had the others, only somewhat less so. They had come West when the going was rough, fought Indians and rustlers, then battled drought, dust, and hot, hard winds. It took a strong man to survive in this country, and they had survived. Neill was the youngest of them all, and the newest in the country. He was still looked upon with some reserve. He had been here only five years.

Neill could see the tracks of the fugitive's buckskin, and it gave him a strange feeling to realize that the man who rode that horse would soon be dead, hanging from a noose in one of those ropes attached to a saddle-horn of Hardin or Kimmel. Neill had never killed a man, nor seen one killed by another man, and the thought made him uncomfortable.

Yet Johnny was gone, and his laughter and his jokes were things past. They had brightened more than one roundup, more than one bitter day of heart-breaking labor on the range. Not that he had been an angel. He had been a proper hand with a gun, and could throw one. And in his time he had had his troubles.

"Lock's walking his horse," Kesney said. "Leading him. "

"He's a heavy man," Hardin agreed, "and he figures to give us a long chase."

"Gone lame on him, maybe," Kimmel suggested.

"No, that horse isn't limping. This Lock is a smart one."

They had walked their horses out of the ankle-deep dust now and were crossing a parched, dry plain of crusted earth. Hardin reined in suddenly and pointed.

"Look there." He indicated a couple of flecks on the face of the earth crust

where something had spilled. "Water splashed."

"Careless," Neill said. "He'll need that water."

"No." Kesney said. "He was pouring water in a cloth to wipe out his horse's nostrils. Bet you a dollar."

"Sure," Hardin agreed, "that's it. Horse breathes a lot better. A man running could kill a good horse on this flat. He knows that."

They rode on, and for almost half an hour no one spoke. Neill frowned at the sun. It had been on his left a few minutes ago, and now they were riding straight into it.

"What's he doing?" Kesney said wonderingly. "This ain't the way to his place!"

The trail had turned again, and now the sun was on their right. Then it turned again and was at their backs. Hardin, in the lead, drew up and swore wickedly.

They ranged alongside him and stared down into a draw that cracked the face of the desert alongside the trail they had followed. Below them was a place where a horse had stood, and across the bank something white fluttered from a parched clump of greasewood.

Kesney slid from the saddle and crossed the wash. When he had the slip of white, he stared at it, then they heard him swear. He walked back and handed it to Hardin. They crowded near.

Neill took the slip from Hardin's fingers after he had read it. It was torn from some sort of book, and the words were plain enough, scrawled with a flat rock for a rest.

> That was a fair shutin anways six ain't nowhars enuf go fetch more men. Man on the gray better titen his girth or heel have him a sorebacked horse.

"Why that—" Short swore softly. "He was lying within fifty yards of us when we come by. Had him a rifle, too. I seen it in a saddle scabbard on that buckskin in town. He could have got one of us, anyway!"

"TWO or three most likely," Kimmel commented.

The men stared at the paper, then looked back into the wash. The sand showed a trail, but cattle had walked here, too. It would make the going a little slower.

Neill, his face flushed and his ears red, was tightening his saddle girth. The others avoided his eyes. The insult to him, even if the advice was good, was an insult to them all. Their jaws tightened. The squatter was playing Indian with them, and none of them liked it.

"Fair shooting, yeah!" Sutter exploded. "Right in the back!"

The trail led down the wash now, and it was slower going. The occasional puffs of wind they had left on the desert above were gone, and the heat in the bottom of the wash was ovenlike. They rode into it, seeming almost to push their way through flames that seared. Sweat dripped into their eyes until they smarted, and it trickled in tiny rivulets through their dust-caked beards, making their faces itch maddeningly.

The wash spilled out into a wide, flat bed of sand left by the rains of bygone years, and the squatter's tracks were plainer now. Neill tightened his bandanna and rode on, sodden with heat and weariness. The trail, he thought, seemed deliberately to lead them into the worst regions, for now he was riding straight toward an alkali lake that loomed ahead.

At the edge of the water, the trail vanished. Lock had ridden right into the lake! They drew up and stared.

"He can't cross," Hardin stated flatly. "That's deep out to the middle. Damn treacherous, too. A horse could get bogged down mighty easy."

They skirted the lake, taking it carefully, three going one way and three the other. Finally, glancing back, Neill saw Kesney's uplifted arm.

"They found it," he said. "Let's go back."

Yet as they rode, he was thinking what they all knew. This was a delay, for Lock knew they would have to scout the shore both ways to find his trail, and there would be a delay while the last three rejoined the first. A small thing, but in such a chase it was important.

"Why not ride right on to the ranch?" Short suggested.

"We might," Hardin speculated. "On the other hand, he might fool us and never go nigh it. Then we could lose him."

The trail became easier, for now Lock was bearing straight into the mountains.

"Where's he going?" Kesney demanded again irritably. "This don't make sense nohow."

There was no reply. The horsemen stretched out in single file, riding up the draw into the mountains. Suddenly Kimmel, who was now in the lead, drew up. Before him a thread of water trickled from the rock and spilled into a basin of stones.

"Huh!" Hardin stared. "I never knowed about this spring before. Might's well have a drink." He swung down.

They all got down, and Neill rolled a smoke.

"Somebody sure fixed her up nice," he said. "That wall of stone making that basin ain't so old."

"No, it ain't."

Short watched them drink and grinned.

"He's a fox, right enough. He's an old *ladino*, that one. A regular mossyhorn. It don't take no time for one man and one horse to drink. But we got six men and six horses, and we lose more time."

"You think he really planned it that way?" Neill was skeptical.

Hardin looked around at him. "Sure. This Lock knows his way around."

When they were riding on, Neill thought about that. Lock *was* shrewd. He was desert wise. And he was leading them a chase. If not even Hardin had known of this spring, and he had been twenty years in the Spring Valley country, then Lock must know a good deal about the country. Of course, this range of mountains was singularly desolate, and there was nothing in them to draw a man.

SO THEY knew this about their quarry. He was a man wise in the ways of desert and trail, and one who knew the country. Also, Neill reflected, it was probable that he had built that basin himself. Nobody lived over this way but Lock, for now it was not far to the Sorenson place.

Now they climbed a single horse trail across the starkly eroded foothills, sprinkled with clumps of Joshua trees and Spanish bayonet. It was a weird and broken land, where long fingers of black lava stretched down the hills and out into the desert as though clawing toward the alkali lake they had left behind. The trail mounted steadily, and a little breeze touched their cheeks. Neill lifted his hand and wiped dust from his brow, and it came away in flakes, plastered by sweat.

The trail doubled and changed, now across the rock face of the burnt red sandstone, then into the lava itself, skirting hills where the exposed ledges mounted in layers like a vast cake of many colors. Then the way dipped down, and they wound among huge boulders, smooth as so many waterworn pebbles. Neill sagged in the saddle, for the hours were growing long, and the trail showed no sign of ending.

"Lucky he ain't waiting to shoot," Kimmel commented, voicing the first remark in over an hour. "He could pick us off like flies."

As if in reply to his comment, there was an angry whine above them, and then the crack of a rifle.

As one man they scattered for shelter, whipping rifles from their scabbards, for all but two had replaced

them when they had reached the lake. Hardin swore, and Kimmel wormed his way to a better view of the country ahead.

Short had left the saddle in his scramble for shelter, and his horse stood in the open, the canteen making a large lump behind the saddle. Suddenly the horse leaped to the solid thud of a striking bullet, and then followed the crack of the rifle, echoing over the mountainside.

Short swore viciously. "If he killed that horse—" But the horse, while shifting nervously, seemed uninjured.

"Hey!" Kesney yelled. "He shot your canteen!"

It was true enough. Water was pouring onto the ground. Swearing, Short started to get up. Sutter grabbed his arm.

"Hold it! If he could get that canteen, he could get you!"

They waited, and the trickle of water slowed, then faded to a drip. All of them stared angrily at the unrewarding rocks ahead of them. One canteen the less. Still, they had all filled up at the spring and should have enough. Uncomfortably, however, they realized that the object of their chase, the man called Chat Lock, knew where he was taking them, and he had not emptied that canteen by chance. Now they understood the nature of the man they followed. He did nothing without object.

Lying on the sand or rocks, they waited, peering ahead.

"He's probably riding off now!" Sutter barked.

Nobody showed any disposition to move. The idea appealed to none of them, for the shot into the canteen showed plainly enough that the man they were following was no child with a rifle. Kimmel finally put his hat on a rifle muzzle and lifted it. There was no response. Then he tried sticking the hat around a corner.

Nothing happened, and he withdrew it. Almost at once, a shot hit the trail not far from where the hat had been. The indication was plain. Lock was warning them not only that he was still there, but that he was not to be fooled by so obvious a trick.

They waited, and Hardin suddenly slid over a rock and began a flanking movement. He crawled, and they waited, watching his progress. The cover he had was good, and he could crawl almost to where the hidden marksman must be. Finally, he disappeared from their sight, and they waited. Neill tasted the water in his canteen and dozed.

AT LAST they heard a long yell and, looking up, saw Hardin standing on a rock far up the trail. waving them on. Mounting, they led Hardin's horse and rode on up the trail. He met them at the trail side, and his eyes were angry.

"Gone!" he said, thrusting out a hard palm. In it lay three brass cartridge shells. "Found 'em standing up in a line on a rock. And look here!"

He pointed, and they stared down at the trail where he indicated. A neat arrow made of stones pointed down the trail ahead of them, and scratched on the face of the sand stone above it were the words:

FOLLER THE SIGNS

Kesney jerked his hat from his head and hurled it to the ground. "Why, that dirty—" He stopped, beside himself with anger. The contempt the man they were pursuing had for them was obvious. He was making fools of them, deliberately teasing them, indicating his trail as to a child or a tenderfoot.

"That ratty, back-shooting killer!" Short said. "I'll take pleasure in using a rope on him! Thinks he's smart!"

They started on, and the horse ahead of them left a plain trail. A quarter of a mile further along, three dried pieces of mesquite had been laid in the trail to form another arrow.

Neill stared at it. This was becoming a personal matter now. Lock was deliberately playing with them and he must know how that would set with

men such as Kimmel and Hardin. It was a deliberate challenge; more, it was a sign of utmost contempt.

The vast emptiness of the basin they were skirting now was becoming lost in the misty purple light of late afternoon. On the right, the wall of the mountain grew steeper and turned a deeper red. The burnt red of the earlier hours was now a bright rust red, and here and there long fingers of quartz shot their white arrows down into the face of the cliff.

They all saw the next message, but all read and averted their eyes. It was written on a blank face of the cliff. First, there was an arrow, pointing ahead, and then the words:

SHADE, SO'S YOU DON'T GET SUNSTROKE

They rode on, and for several miles as the shadows drew down, they followed the markers their quarry left at intervals along the trail. All six of the men were tired and beaten. Their horses moved slowly, and the desert air was becoming chill. It had been a long chase.

Suddenly, Kimmel and Kesney, who rode side by side, reined in. A small wall or rock was across the trail, and an arrow pointed downward into a deep cleft.

"What do you think, Hardin? He could pick us off, man by man."

Hardin studied the situation with misgivings and hesitated, lighting a smoke.

"He ain't done it yet."

Neill's remark fell into the still air like a rock into a calm pool of water. As the rings of ripples spread wider into the thoughts of the others, he waited.

Lock could have killed one or two of them, perhaps all of them by now. Why hadn't he? Was he waiting for darkness and an easy getaway? Or was he leading them into a trap?

"The devil with it!" Hardin exclaimed impatiently.

He wheeled his horse and, pistol in hand, started down into the narrow rift in the dark. One by one, they followed. The darkness closed around them, and the air was damp and chill. They rode on, then the trail mounted steeply toward a grayness ahead of them, and they came out in a small basin. Ahead of them they heard a trickle of running water and saw the darkness of trees.

CAUTIOUSLY they approached. Suddenly, they saw the light of a fire. Hardin drew up sharply and slid from his horse. The others followed. In a widening circle, they crept toward the fire. Kesney was the first to reach it, and the sound of his swearing rent the stillness and shattered it like thin glass. They swarmed in around him.

The fire was built close to a small running stream, and near by was a neat pile of dry sticks. On a paper, laid out carefully on a rock was a small mound of coffee and another of sugar. Nobody said anything for a minute, staring at the fire and the coffee. The taunt was plain, and they were bitter men. It was bad enough to have a stranger—a killer—make such fools of them on a trail, to treat them like tenderfeet, but to prepare a camp for them!

"I'll be damned if I will!" Short said violently. "I'll go to sleep on the desert first!"

"Well"—Hardin was philosophical—"might's well make the most of it. We can't trail him at night, no way."

Kimmel had dug a coffee pot out of his pack and was getting water from the stream which flowed from a basin just above their camp. Several of the others began to dig out grub, and Kesney sat down and stared glumly into the fire. He started to pick a stick off the pile left for them, then jerked his hand back as though he had seen a snake.

Getting up, he stalked back into the trees. After a minute, he returned.

Sutter was looking around, and suddenly he spoke. "Boys, I know this place! Only I never knew about that

crack in the wall. This here's the Mormon Well!"

Hardin sat up and looked around. "Damned if it ain't!" he said. "I ain't been here for six or seven years."

Sutter squatted on his haunches. "Look!" He was excited and eager. "Here's Mormon Well, where we are. Right over here to the northwest there's an old sawmill and a tank just above it. I'll bet a side of beef that damned killer is holed up for the night in that sawmill!"

Kesney, who had taken most to heart the taunting of the man they pursued, was on his knees staring at the diagram drawn in the damp sand. He was nodding thoughtfully.

"Sutter's right! He sure is. I remember that old mill! I holed up there one time in a bad storm. Spent two days in it. If that sidewinder stays there tonight, we can get him!"

As they ate, they talked over their plan. Traveling over the rugged mountains ahead of them was almost impossible in the darkness, and besides, even if Lock could go the night without stopping, his horse could not. The buckskin must have rest. Moreover, with all the time Lock had been losing along the trail, he could not be far ahead. It stood to reason that he must have planned just this—for them to stop here and to hole up in the sawmill himself.

"We'd better surprise him," Hardin suggested. "That sawmill is heavy timber, and a man in there with a rifle and plenty of ammunition, could stand us off for a week."

"Has he got plenty?"

"Sure he has," Neill told them. "I was in the Bon Ton when he bought his stuff. He's got grub and he's got plenty of forty-fours. They do for either his Colt or his Winchester."

Unspoken as yet, but present in the mind of each man was a growing respect for their quarry, a respect and an element of doubt. Would such a man as this shoot another in the back? The evidence against him was plain enough, or seemed plain enough.

Yet beyond the respect there was something else, for it was no longer simply a matter of justice to be done, but a personal thing. Each of them felt in some measure that his reputation was at stake. It had not been for Lock to leave an obvious trail, but he must leave markers, the sort to be used for any tenderfoot, and there were men in this group who could trail a woodtick through a pine forest.

"Well," Kimmel said reluctantly and somewhat grimly, "he left us good coffee, anyway!"

THEY tried the coffee and agreed. Few things in this world are so comforting and so warming to the heart as hot coffee on a chilly night over a campfire when the day has been long and weary. They drank and they relaxed. And as they relaxed, the seeds of doubt began to sprout and put forth branches of speculation.

"He could have got more'n one of us today," Sutter hazarded. "This feller is brush-wise."

"I'll pull that rope on him!" Short stated positively. "No man makes a fool out of me!" But in his voice there was something in determination lacking.

"You know," Kesney suggested, "if he knows these hills like he seems to, and if he really wanted to lose us, we'd have to burn the stumps and sift the ashes before we found him."

There was no reply. Hardin drew back and eased the leg of his pants away from the skin, for the cloth had grown too hot for comfort.

Short tossed a stick from the neat pile into the fire.

"That mill ain't so far away," he suggested. "Will we give her a try?"

"Later." Hardin leaned back against a log and yawned. "She's been a hard day."

"Both them bullets go in Johnny's back?"

The question moved among them like a ghost. Short stirred uneasily,

and Kesney looked up and glared around. "Sure they did. Didn't they, Hardin?"

"Sure." He paused thoughtfully. "Well, no. One of them was under his left arm. Right between the ribs. Looked like a heart shot to me. The other one went through near his spine."

"The hell with it!" Kesney declared. "No slick, rustling squatter can come into this country and shoot one of our boys! Johnny was shot in the back, and I seen both holes. Johnny got that one nigh the spine and he must have turned and tried to draw, then got that bullet through the heart!"

Nobody had seen it. Neill remembered that, and the thought rankled. Were they doing an injustice? He felt like a traitor at the thought, but secretly he had acquired a stronger tinge of respect for the man they followed.

The fire flickered, and the shadows danced a slow, rhythmic quadrille against the dark background of the trees. He peeled bark from the log beside him and fed it into the fire. It caught and sparked brightly and popped once or twice. Hardin leaned over and pushed the coffee pot nearer the coals. Kesney checked the loads in his Winchester.

"How far to that sawmill, Hardin?"

"About six miles, the way we go."

"Let's get started." Short got to his feet and brushed off the sand. "I want to get home. Got my boys building fence. You either keep a close watch or they are off gal-hooting over the hills."

They tightened their saddle girths, doused the fire, and mounted up. With Hardin in the lead once more, they moved off into the darkness.

Neill brought up the rear. It was damp and chill among the cliffs and felt like the inside of a cavern. Overhead the stars were bright.

Mary was going to be worried, for he was never home so late. Nor did he like leaving her alone. He wanted to be home, eating a warm supper and going to bed in the old four-poster with the patchwork quilt Mary's grandmother had made, pulled over him. What enthusiasm he had had for the chase was gone. The warm fire, the coffee, his own weariness, and the growing respect for Lock had changed him.

NOW they all knew Lock was not the manner of man they had supposed. Justice can be a harsh taskmaster, but Western men know their kind, and the lines were strongly drawn. When you have slept beside a man on the trail, worked with him, and with others like him, you come to know your kind. In the trail of the man Chat Lock, each rider of the posse was seeing the sort of man he knew, the sort he could respect. The thought was nagging and unsubstantial, but each of them felt a growing doubt.

Even Short and Kesney who were the most obdurate and resentful. They knew how a back-shooter lived and worked. He had his brand on everything he did. The mark of this man Lock was the mark of a man who did things, who stood upon his own two feet and who, if he died, died facing his enemy. To the unknowing, such conclusions might seem doubtful, but the men of the desert knew their kind.

The mill was dark and silent, a great looming bulk beside the stream and the still pool of the mill pond. The posse dismounted and eased close. Then, according to a prearranged plan, they scattered and surrounded the place.

From behind a lodgepole pine, Hardin called out:

"We're coming in, Lock! We want you!"

The challenge was harsh and ringing. Now that the moment had come, something of the old suspense returned. They listened to the water babbling as it trickled over the old dam, then they moved. At their first

step, they heard Lock's voice.

"Don't come in here, boys! I don't want to kill none of you, but you come, and I will! That was a fair shooting like I told you! You've got no call to come after me!"

Hardin hesitated, chewing his mustache. "You shot him in the back!" he yelled.

"No such thing! He was a-facing the bar when I come in. He seen I was heeled, and he drawed as he turned. I beat him to it. My first shot took him in the side, and he was knocked back against the bar. My second hit him in the back, and the third missed as he was a-falling. You hombres didn't see that right."

The sound of his voice trailed off and the water chuckled over the stones, then sighed to a murmur among the trees. The logic of Lock's statement struck them all. It *could* have been that way.

A long moment passed, then Hardin spoke up again. "You come in, and we'll give you a trial. Fair and square!"

"How?" Lock's voice was a challenge. "You ain't got no witnesses. Neither have I. Ain't anybody to say what happened there but me, as Johnny ain't alive."

"Johnny was a mighty good man, and he was our friend!" Short shouted. "No murdering squatter is going to move into this country and start shooting folks up!"

There was no reply to that, and they waited, hesitating a little. Neill leaned disconsolately against the tree where he stood. After all, Lock might be telling the truth. How did they know? There was no use hanging a man unless you were sure.

"Gab!" Short's comment was explosive. "Let's move in, Hardin! Let's get him! He's lying! Nobody could beat Johnny. We know that."

"Webb was a good man in his own country!" Lock shouted back at them.

The momentary silence that followed held them, and then, almost as a man, they began moving in. Neill did not know exactly when or why he started. Inside, he felt sick and empty. He was fed up with the whole business, and every instinct told him that this man was no back-shooter.

Carefully they moved, for they knew that this man was handy with a gun. Suddenly, Hardin's voice rang out.

"Hold it, men! Stay where you are until daybreak! Keep your eyes open and your ears. If he gets out of here, he'll be lucky, and in the daylight, we can get him or fire the mill!"

NEILL sank to a squat behind a log. Relief was a great warmth that swept over him. There wouldn't be any killing tonight. Not tonight, at least.

As the hours passed, his ears grew more and more attuned to the darkness. A rabbit rustled, a pine cone dropped from a tree, the wind stirred high in the pine tops. The few stars winked through, lonesomely peering down upon the silent men.

With daylight they moved in and they went through the doors and up to the windows of the old mill, and it was empty and still. They stared at each other, and Short swore viciously, the sound booming in the echoing, empty room.

"Let's go down to the Sorenson place," Kimmel said. "He'll be there."

And somehow they were all sure he would be. They knew he would be because they knew him for their kind of man. He would retreat no further than his own ranch, his own hearth. There, if they were to have him and hang him, they would have to burn him out, and men would die in the process.

Yet in these men there was no fear. They felt the drive of duty, the need for maintaining some law in this lonely desert and mountain land. There was only doubt, which had grown until each man was shaken with it. Even Short, whom the markers by the trail

had angered, and Kesney, who was the best tracker among them, even better than Hardin, had been irritated by these markers, too.

The sun was up and warming them when they rode over the brow of the hill and looked down into the parched basin on the Sorenson place.

But it was no parched basin. Hardin drew up so suddenly his startled horse almost reared. It was no longer the Sorenson place.

The house had been patched and rebuilt. The roof had spots of new lumber upon it, and the old pole barn had been made watertight and strong. A new corral had been built, and to the right of the house was a fenced-in garden of vegetables, green and pretty after the dry and dismal desert of the day before.

Thoughtfully, and in a tight cavalcade, they rode down the hill. The stock they saw was fat and healthy, and the corral was filled with lively horses.

"Been a lot of work done here," Kesney said. And he knew how much work it took to make a place like this attractive.

"Don't look like no killer's place to me!" Neill burst out. Then he flushed and drew back, embarrassed. After all, he was the youngest of these men, and the newest in the country, and had no right to talk.

No response was forthcoming. Neill had but stated what they all believed. There was something stable, lasting, something real and genuine in this place.

"I been waiting for you."

The remark, behind them, stiffened every spine. Chat Lock was here, behind them. And he would have a gun on them, and if one of them moved, he could die.

"My wife's down there, fixing breakfast. I told her I had some friends coming in. A posse hunting a killer. I've told her nothing about this trouble. You ride down there now, you keep your guns. You eat your breakfast, and then if you feel bound and determined to get somebody for a fair shooting, I'll come out with any one or all of you, but I ain't going to hang. I ain't naming no one man, because I don't want to force no fight on anybody. You ride down there now."

They rode, and in the dooryard they dismounted. Neill turned then, and for the first time he saw Chat Lock.

He was a big man, compact and strong. His rusty brown hair topped a brown, sun-hardened face, but with warmth in the eyes, it was a friendly sort of face. Not at all what Neill had expected.

HARDIN looked at the squatter. "You've made some changes here."

"I reckon." Lock gestured toward the well. "Dug by hand. My wife worked the windlass." He looked around at them, taking them in with one sweep of his eyes. "I've got the grandest woman in the world."

Neill felt hot tears in his eyes suddenly and busied himself loosening his saddle girth to keep the others from seeing. That was the way he felt about Mary.

The door opened suddenly, and they turned. The sight of a woman in this desert country was enough to make any man turn. What they saw was not what they expected. She was young, perhaps in her middle twenties, and she was pretty, with wavy brown hair and gray eyes, and a few freckles on her nose.

"Won't you come in?" she invited cheerfully. "Chat told me he had some friends coming for breakfast, and it isn't often we have anybody in."

Heavy-footed and shame-faced, they walked up on the porch. Kesney saw the care and neatness with which the hard, hewn planks had been fitted. Here, too, was the same evidence of lasting, of permanence, of strength. The man who had done this was the sort the country needed. Kesney thought the thought before he fixed

his attention on it, and then he flushed.

Inside, the room was as neat as the girl herself. How did she get the floors so clean? Before he thought, Neill framed the question. She smiled.

"Oh, that was Chat's idea. He made a frame and fastened a piece of pumice stone to a stick. It cuts into all the cracks and keeps them clean."

The food smelled good, and when Hardin looked at his hands, Chat motioned to the door.

"There's water and towels if you want to wash up."

Neill rolled up his sleeves and dipped his hands in the basin. The water was soft, and that was rare in this country, and the soap felt good on his hands. When he had dried his hands, he walked in. Hardin and Kesney were already seated, and Lock's wife was pouring coffee.

"Men," Lock said, "this is Mary. You'll have to tell her your names. I reckon I missed them."

Mary. Neill looked up. She was Mary, too. He looked down at his plate again and ate a few bites. When he looked up, she was smiling at him.

"My wife's name is Mary," he said. "She's a fine girl."

"She would be! But why don't you bring her over? I haven't talked with a woman in so long I've almost forgotten how it seems. Chat, why haven't you invited them over?"

Chat mumbled something, and Neill stared at his coffee. The men ate in uncomfortable silence. Hardin's eyes kept shifting around the room. That pumice stone. He'd have to fix up a deal like that for Jane. She was always fussing about the work of keeping a board floor clean. That washstand inside, too, with pipes made of hollow logs to carry the water out so she wouldn't have to be running back and forth. That was an idea, too.

They finished their meal reluctantly. One by one they trooped outside, avoiding each other's eyes. Chat Lock did not keep them waiting. He walked down among them.

"If there's to be a shooting," he said quietly, "let's get away from the house."

Hardin looked up. "Lock, was that right, what you said in the mill? Was it a fair shooting?"

Lock nodded. "It was. Johnny Webb prodded me. I didn't want trouble, nor was I looking for it when I walked over to the saloon, though we'd had words. I aimed to give him a chance if he wanted it. He drawed, and I beat him. It was a fair shooting."

"All right." Hardin nodded. "That's good enough for me. I reckon you're a different sort of man than any of us figured."

"Let's mount up," Short said. "I got fence to build."

Chat Lock put his hand on Hardin's saddle. "You folks come over some time. She gets right lonesome. I don't mind it so much, but you know how womenfolks are."

"Sure," Hardin said. "Sure thing."

"And you bring your Mary over," Lock told Neill.

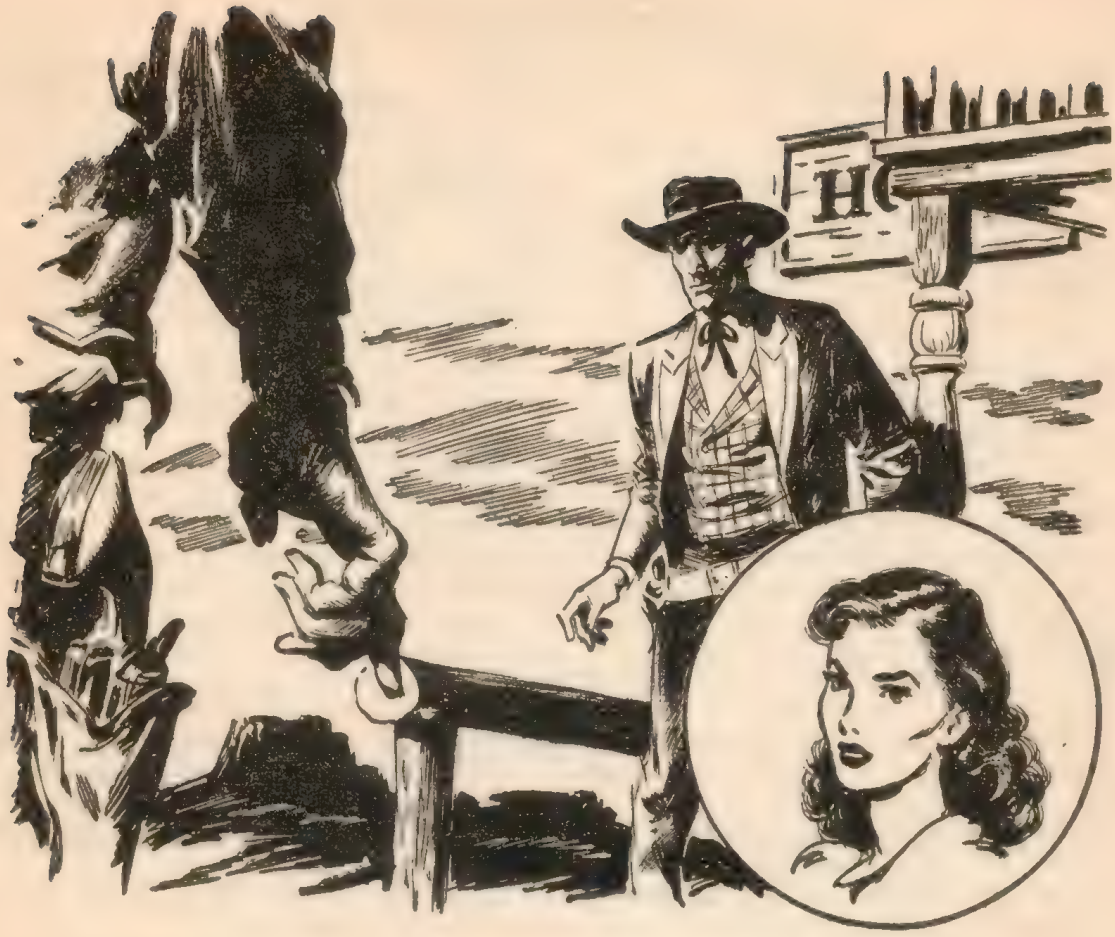
Neill nodded, his throat full. As they mounted the hill, he glanced back. Mary Lock was standing in the doorway, waving to them, and the sunlight was bright in the clean-swept door yard.

NOT FAIR!

THE scene was the interior of a saloon in the Far West, and around the table were gathered as tough a crowd as could be found in the whole Gold Coast. The game was fast and furious, the stakes extremely high.

Suddenly the dealer flung his cards on the table, and threateningly pulled out his six-shooter. "Boys," he shouted, "this game ain't a straight one! Slimey Pete ain't playin' the hand I dealt him."

—Tex Mumford



The Guns of Kildore

By HARRISON HENDRYX

She still wanted no part of him but the magic of his guns

KILDORE rode into Whiterock on a long-legged, high-headed buckskin. He rode straight up the main street in the early dark, the thought coming to him that the town had not changed, that it was as he had left it four years ago.

He knew this was not so, however, and that it had changed greatly. Even before he noted the vast new structure between the Palace and Eagle Saloons, where formerly had been Tinker's saddle shop and Bigg's feed store and Krevitch's hardware establishment, he knew it had changed.

The new building bore the sign "RASMUSSEN'S in foot-high block letters across the front, below which

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were smaller legends proclaiming that anything from a drink to a bed for the night could be had within.

Ernie Rasmussen, Kildore thought. You've done right well for yourself, now haven't you?

It was a warm spring night and people moved along the boardwalks on either side of the dusty street, seeming to reflect the restlessness and tension which Kildore knew lay over the town. Nor did anyone appear to pay more than cursory note to the lanky, deep-chested newcomer who trotted past them on the high-headed buckskin.

Kildore glanced at the Stevens House, directly across from Rasmussen's, its sign faded by weather, and he frowned. The place, though lighted, appeared empty.

"So it's as bad as that, eh?" he muttered, remembering the days long gone when Lillith Stevens had been pushed to find room for her patrons on most any given night.

Kildore rode to the livery stable at the end of the street, swung down, and stripped off the saddle. Taking a gunny-sack from a pile beside the broad doorway, he quickly rubbed down the mount. The hostler came from somewhere in back then, an unkempt, long-nosed man whom Kildore had never seen before.

"Johnny around?" Kildore asked in a quiet voice.

"Johnny?" The man looked puzzled.

"Al Johnson, who runs this place," Kildore said, and then amended, "or who used to."

"Never heard of him," the man said. "I been here nigh onto two years now and I never heard of no Johnson. This here's Rasmussen's barn. Must be you got the wrong town, mister."

"Yeah," Kildore said slowly. "Yeah, must be." He was thinking of Johnny, the humpbacked hostler who always had a smile on his face, and he frowned again, reached down and eased the two big black-butted guns forward on his thighs.

HE HANDED the unkempt man the reins that had been ground-hitched.

"Not much water, and a bait of oats," he said. "Treat him right, friend, and you'll find it worth your while."

"You looking for a bed and a good bait of grub yourself, go to Rasmussen's," the man said. "That big new building up the street yonder."

Kildore felt anger surge through him and turned sharply toward the man. So this was the way Rasmussen did it—pressure. The minute you hit town you were given to know that he had taken over.

"I like the Stevens House," he replied tightly, and then let the anger go out of him. This man was just a hireling, no doubt following the lines of least resistance.

"Not many stays there any more," the man said. "You see, mister, Rasmussen runs this here town of Whiterock, and when he don't like a place, why most people knows what's good for 'em and stays away from there. And Rasmussen, he don't like the Stevens at all."

"Why, now, that's right interesting," Kildore drawled, "but it just so happens I'm the kind of hombre that never did know what was good for him."

He stooped then, untied his warbag from behind the saddle, slung it over his shoulder, and left the unkempt man holding the buckskin's reins and staring curiously at his broad back.

There was no one at the desk and Kildore dinged the bell and heard light footsteps coming from the kitchen in back.

"Dan!"

"Hello, Lil."

The girl came forward, hand outstretched, smiling, and Kildore felt the old thrill again, blooming as ever before at the sight of her. She was a

straight-backed girl with dark hair and direct gray eyes. He had once thought her the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen and, studying her now —four years and a good many towns later—he knew it was still so, even though she was thinner and he could see fine lines of worry in her face.

"I didn't expect you for a week, Dan," she said, "if at all."

"You were never sure, were you, Lil—about me, that is?"

"You were wild, reckless," she said. "I was young. You went too fast, Dan."

He grinned wryly, some of the bitterness he'd known touching him once again.

"I said I'd never come back unless you called me—and I didn't." He had his moment of triumph then, but was as suddenly ashamed.

"It's not just for me," she said quickly. "If you think that, why you can just turn around and ride out again, Dan Kildore. It's for this whole part of the country, all the decent people. You just seemed the best one to do the job—they speak of your guns way up here even—and when we can we'll pay you for cleaning up this mess. As much as Dodge paid you."

He laughed easily. "Same old Lil. You still catch fire at the drop of a hat, don't you? But just so we know how it is, gal, there's not enough money in the land to buy me to tame another town. You see, Dodge did pretty well by me for marshaling, and I don't need money. I got enough to stock me a pretty good-sized spread—like, say the Triangle S your dad left you. So, whether you like it or not, I'm sitting in on this little party for just one reason, and I think you know as well as I do that you're it, Lil."

She colored and seemed about to make some vehement retort, then she smiled.

"You still go awfully fast, don't you, Dan? But as for the Triangle, you wouldn't want it. It's been a white elephant ever since—well, ever since Rasmussen took over around here. The cattle disappear. He's cut off the market here so that we have to drive clear to Trail City. He's put the squeeze on a lot of other ranches in the same way, too, and now he holds mortgages on most of them."

"Why didn't you go after him before he got such a toe-hold?"

"I'm a woman, Dan. I can't shoot, but I've done what I could and it was never enough. And you see what it's got me." She swept her hand toward the vacant lobby. "Boycotted. But I never stopped fighting in the way I could, and I never will."

DAN drawled, "Seems to me there were some men around when I left."

"Yes, there were," she agreed, "but this was always one of the most peaceful counties in the West, and they weren't good with guns. Oh, some of them fought, but they couldn't stand up to him. A lot died, trying. He's terribly fast with a gun, and then he always bought a lot of help, of course."

"I'll need help, too," Kildore said. "One man can't stop a thing like this, though he can see that it gets done."

"You'll get help," Lillith Stevens said. "Once they know you're here and really mean to stop Rasmussen, you'll get plenty of help. That's why we needed someone like you, someone with a reputation, to front the thing and give them confidence."

"Who's 'we'?" Kildore said a trifle impatiently. "Who's 'them'?"

"A lot of the old ranchers you knew, many of the townspeople. I think I can safely say that if you could somehow get Rasmussen on the run, at least three-quarter of the people hereabouts would give you a hand. Brad Farrell, a good man who's been rodding the Triangle for me the last couple years, knows about this and has agreed to side you all the way. He's in town tonight and will be along directly."

Kildore was rolling a cigarette and seemed not to be listening to her now.

"Whose idea was it to bring me in?" he asked suddenly.

She looked away and again color darkened her face.

"Why—why, it was mine, I guess. But—"

"That's enough, Lil," he said, and the grin was back on his face. "All I need now is one of those thick hunks of cow you used to fix so rare, and the promise that if I bust this thing you'll sell me the Triangle S at your own price."

"Fair enough, Dan," she said without hesitation and, turning, led the way back to the kitchen.

Brad Farrell came in while Kildore was finishing his third cup of coffee. He was a well-constructed man of medium height, with a shock of black hair that pushed beneath his gray stetson and a face that was trifle too pointed to be handsome. He wore a single gun at his left hip.

"A portsider, eh?" Kildore said pleasantly, noting with some surprise the warm familiarity that existed between Farrell and Lil Stevens.

It struck Kildore then that maybe he'd waited too long to come back. But still, it had been him she'd sent for when in trouble.

Only because of your guns, though, he told himself bitterly. You're just a gunman to her, fast and wild and fiddle-footed. You're just a man brought in to clean up a mess so's she and gents like this Farrell here can live in peace.

Kildore pushed back his chair.

"Can you shoot?" he asked Farrell brusquely.

"Maybe not in your league," the man said. "Not if the stories I've heard are true, anyway. But I get by."

"Good. Because there's going to be shooting a-plenty, I'm thinking, before this is over."

Farrell smiled at Lil and sat down on the edge of the table.

"Where do we start, Boss?"

"The name's Dan," Kildore said quietly. He felt a sudden dislike for the black-haired cowboy, but fought it, knowing that at least part of it was due to the track the man seemed to have with Lil. "And we start right now—as soon as we can get over to Rasmussen's."

"That seems like walking right into the lion's den," Lil said. "Isn't there some other way, Dan? I mean, that's his stronghold over there and I—I'm afraid for you two."

"I figure surprise is a good two strikes in any man's game," Kildore said. "And he don't know what I'm here for, does he, Lil? That is, you haven't spread it around?"

SHE said quickly, "Oh, no, no one's said anything. We didn't even know for sure you'd come. Then, too, everybody figured the same as you, that you'd have a better chance of getting started if Rasmussen didn't know the setup. No, we're all for you, aren't we, Brad?"

"Sure," Brad Farrell replied. "Anyone that can stop Rasmussen, he's our man."

"Well, now, that's nice," Kildore said. But he was thinking again that he was nothing but a gunhand in their eyes and wishing that, for Lil anyway, the picture could be a different one. So his words came out cold and impersonal.

He stood up then, touching his big guns gently.

"Just one more thing, Lil," he said. "When I rode in, Johnny wasn't at the livery barn. Man said he never heard of him. I liked Johnny a heap. Always had a smile, even crippled like he was. What happened?"

"Rasmussen," said the girl simply. "They say it was self-defense. Others say, but they whisper it, that Johnny's gun wasn't even fired when they picked him up with five slugs in his chest."

"Johnny never carried a gun, Lil. You know that."

"He did later," she said. "After they took to stealing horses out of the barn late at night. A lot of people who never wore guns started packing them. Then, later still, they stopped carrying them. You can't kill a bear with a slingshot, Dan. It just makes the bear mad, gives him a better excuse to kill you."

"Yeah," Dan Kildore said.. "Yeah, I see what you mean. There was a feller called David did all right with a slingshot, though."

"But that was a long time ago," she said. "And Goliath was just one man, not a dozen men with fast sixguns."

He looked down at her, turned from the lamplight as she was, so that her lovely face was in shadow. And in that moment he wished mightily that Brad Farrell were not there.

"Well, so long."

"So long," she said. "And please be careful."

She was looking at Farrell when she said this last. Kildore turned and strode with an easy, swinging, catlike grace into the lobby and onto the street, bitterness a black thing within him.

He stood there a moment, feet spread, and rolled a cigarette. He cupped a match in his hands to light his smoke, then Farrell came out and they moved silently across the street to Rasmussen's.

There was a partition that divided the building in two.

"The back half's got gambling on the lower deck and hotel rooms above," Farrel informed. "This front half is just saloon and dance hall, as you can see."

"Mmm," Kildore acknowledged.

The bar was noisy and crowded. A space opened at the end of the bar and Kildore moved into it, putting his back to the wall. He called for two whiskys and laid a silver dollar on the bar.

"Keep tab of what you spend," Farrell said. "Naturally, we're footing all your expenses."

Kildore felt anger wash through him again. A reminder, he thought, that he was a paid gunhand. But he said nothing. This Farrell gent wouldn't understand that this was a job he'd take no money for. That this was for a girl who thought him no better than a tramp—and for a smiling, humpbacked man who'd been his friend.

Shooting a quick glance along the bar, Kildore caught two men studying him closely. One was toward the bar's middle, a lean, dark man with a crooked nose, and the other stood at the far end of the mahogany, a flat-faced, cold-eyed man with almost white-blond hair. He'd never seen either before, and yet both looked away abruptly as his gaze touched them.

"So they don't know who I am nor why I'm here, eh?" he mused. "Looks like somebody tipped the apple-cart, Lil."

"You say something?" Farrell asked at his elbow.

"I said this is quite a rat trap he's got here," Kildore drawled, knowing and not caring that the other knew he'd said no such thing. So let them play it their way, he thought, and grinned cynically. They'd find him a pretty tough weed to hoe, whatever way they swung out.

HE LOOKED down the bar again, this time for faces he knew, and found them. There was old Charlie Dryden of the D Bar and Harry Biggs who'd run the feed store that had once stood on this very site. There was Clem Egleston of the wagonwheel and Bert Smith and Slim Pardee, townsmen, and big Gil Mandales, the Mexican who rode for Dryden's D Bar.

Harry Biggs looked his way and let an eyelid flutter, and Dryden held up his glass, sighting him covertly over the rim before he drank. Kildore felt warmth go through him. These were men he trusted, good men, and he knew that once things got rolling, he'd

get the help Lillith Stevens had promised.

"Where's Rasmussen hang out?" he asked Farrell now.

"Usually back in the gambling hall selling chips. They say there's not many he trusts when it comes to actual handling the money."

"Reckon I'll mosey back and get the lay of the land," said Kildore. "Things won't pop for awhile, maybe days yet, so you can stay here, drift along back with me, or do whatever else you got in mind."

"I'll catch me another drink then," Farrell said, "before I join you."

Another set of batwings led through the partition to the gambling hall beyond. Kildore pushed through them and lost the din of the saloon behind him in this new subdued atmosphere wherein could plainly be heard the brittle click of the ivory roulette balls and the coarser click of chips.

He saw Ernie Rasmussen then. The little, hawk-faced man with the slick patent-leather hair, who now cracked a whip over this town, sat behind a grilled cage built into the north wall. He sat on a stool with just his head and shoulder sticking out over a counter built of heavy oak planks.

Those planks would stop a Winchester slug, Kildore found himself thinking. And again he felt strange eyes on him and knew that his coming had been no secret. He marked well the owners of the eyes that intently covered him and proceeded on to Rasmussen's cage.

"Hello, Ernie," he said. "You come a long ways since I last saw you. You were dealing faro at the Palace those days, remember?"

"Sure I remember," the man said coldly. "What'll it be, Kildore?"

Dan Kildore pulled a flat packet of bills from his levis. "A couple thousand in blue chips will do for now," he said. "And one of your boys that's willing to play draw poker for the same."

"Sure," Rasmussen said. "Spanner here will oblige you."

He nodded toward a squat man with a craggy face who wore the usual trappings of a professional gambler—the eyeshade, boiled shirt, black coat, and string tie.

Kildore walked to an empty table near the south wall, across from Rasmussen's cage. Putting his back to the wall, he sat down and watched the man Spanner break the seal on a new deck of cards.

He won the first three pots quickly, Spanner drawing against him only once and then, obviously failing to better his hand, tossing in. But it was on the fourth hand that Kildore knew the play wasn't set for days in advance, as he'd told Farrell, or even hours. It was set for right now—unless he changed it.

It was kind of crude, too, the way they were working it, he thought. But he knew it would be nonetheless effective if he reacted as they expected him to do.

However, when Spanner clumsily dealt himself four cards instead of three on the draw and then quite as clumsily slipped the extra card into his discards, Kildore did not twitch a muscle. He had opened the pot and he checked it to Spanner.

Spanner shoved blue chips out.

"Five hundred," he said.

"That beats," Kildore said evenly, and tossed in his hand.

SPANNER was too much the gambler to betray surprise, but Kildore glanced up in time to catch the slack-jawed amazement of the fat-faced blond man he'd seen at the bar, and to read tension in the face of Ernie Rasmussen in his cage across from him. They'd heard Kildore was tough, a man who took no one's dirt, and they couldn't quite figure his ignoring a deal so palpably crooked.

Kildore looked casually about the room, but his mind was carefully tabulating the position of each man he counted against him. The blond man

was to his left, making a show of kibitzing a stud game there. But his hand rested on the butt of his Colt and his eyes kept flicking surreptitiously to Kildore's table.

To the right, lounging in apparent idleness against a roulette layout, was the slight, dark man with the crooked nose, whom Kildore also had seen watching him at the bar.

There was Murphy, and old man now, who still wore the star of town marshal on his coat and the same flat-brimmed, battered hat on his head. Murphy wouldn't draw. He'd straddle the fence as he'd always straddled it, then step to the side of the winners.

All the housemen were possibilities, of course, but Kildore knew that gamblers instinctively disliked the smell of powdersmoke, and he did not count them too heavily. Rasmussen would have a shotgun with buckshot in his cage and he, perhaps, would be the most dangerous. He and the little crooked-nosed man who had gun skill written in every line of his lazy demeanor.

Kildore knew they had him bottled, that the odds were mighty heavy however you tallied them. But he saw, too, that Charlie Dryden and big Gil Mandales had come into the hall, and that Harry Biggs had sidled in. And they were packing hardware, which made bulges beneath their coats.

Also, there was Farrell. Farrell was buying chips, talking to Rasmussen. Kildore was not sure of Farrell, though he was aware that the obvious regard in which Lillith Stevens held the man was probably more to blame for this than anything the man himself had done.

They played three more hands, with Kildore winning two of them, before Spanner made his second try. He made a fumbling bottom deal that even the rawest pilgrim could not have missed, and yet Kildore paid it no slightest heed.

And then abruptly Dan Kildore saw Farrell. He saw him hand Marshal Murphy the stack of chips he'd just bought and step around Spanner to the side of the table. Farrell's right hand was doubled into a fist and he coolly drew his six-gun with his left, covering Spanner.

"This snake's cheating you, Kildore," he said harshly. "Dealt 'em spank off the bottom, he did!"

Kildore shoved his chair back. For the briefest moment the play bewildered him, then out of the tail of his eye he saw Rasmussen ease the gaping shotgun over black hardwood counter, and Kildore savvied with a crystal clarity the way it was.

Failing to bait him into action, they now intended making him the innocent victim of a gambling brawl!

He came into it with a bound, kneeing the table up so that it slapped Farrell's gun noisily, then ducking low to hear the blast of the shotgun as one with splat of buckshot against the upturned table.

His guns were magically in his hands and even as he whipped them up, swiveling to his right, he saw the slight, crooked-nosed man taking careful aim. He let both hammers fall with a quick and silent prayer and watched the little man jolt back as though hit with a plank.

He heard Spanner shriek, "Get him, Lefty!" and felt the numbing kick of a slug take him high on the left shoulder.

THEN he was firing pointblank into the face of Farrell, not six feet away, turning that face into a hideous red mask. Farrell sprawled sideward against the heap that was Spanner and the overturned table, but Kildore did not stop dropping gun hammers, firing past the fallen man at the slick-haired head of Rasmussen showing above the counter of the grilled cage.

He saw a bullet curl a shaving off the counter in front of Rasmussen and go on to catch him squarely in the nose. Remembering the ugly, white-blond man then, Kildore whirled

again. But the blond man was down in a twisted heap on the floor, and over him stood the hulking figure of Gil Mandales, a smoking sixgun like a toy in his great beefy hand.

Spanner, entangled beneath Farrell's body and the table as he was, was still trying to bring a derringer into play. Kildore lashed out with his foot to kick mightily the hand that fumbled with the tiny gun. The snapping of wrist bones could be heard plainly in the now quieted hall.

Kildore looked up and around and saw that guns covered the housemen and all others who'd shown allegiance to Rasmussen. Guns in the hands of Harry Biggs and Mandales and Dryden and Eleston. And he grinned.

Slim Pardee came through the batwings from the bar, gun in hand.

"Hell!" he breathed. "Hell, what a cleanup! We got the front under control, too, Dan. Looks like a clean sweep."

"Yeah, a clean sweep," Kildore agreed wearily. "Thanks for riding along, fellers."

"He thanks us!" old Charlie Dryden snorted. "Why, man, man! I never see or hear tell of such a hand with a gun! We'll never forget what you done if we live to a hundred and umpty-nine, boy; Just name it—anything you want. Whiterock's yours for the asking, son."

Kildore thrust his big guns back into leather, feeling a strange giddiness come over him. His left shoulder was filled with a red-hot, blinding ache. He looked down at Farrell and shook his head, thinking of Lil Stevens, and brought his right hand up gingerly to his blood-wet shoulder.

"Those chips on the floor, Charlie," he said. "Just cash me in, will you?" And then he fell forward on his face into a merciful oblivion. . . .

He was lying in a bed when he came to, and he immediately recognized his surroundings as Lil's suite of rooms in the hotel. He saw her then and breathed in the sweet, clean smell of her as she got up from beside the bed and laid a cool hand on his brow.

"Thanks, Dan," she said simply, and looked at him with her level gray eyes, below which tear runnels plainly wet her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," he said, and felt bitterness welling up in him again. "You feel pretty bad about Farrell. I reckon."

"Oh, no!" she said. "No, that's not it at all. He had me fooled all right, and he got what was coming to him. But I just thought—I mean, I was afraid you'd figure I knew all along he was in with Rasmussen. Dan, you don't, do you? Say you don't."

"Why, pshaw, Lil, you know me better'n that."

She smiled then and Kildore, lying there, thought it the prettiest sight of the world.

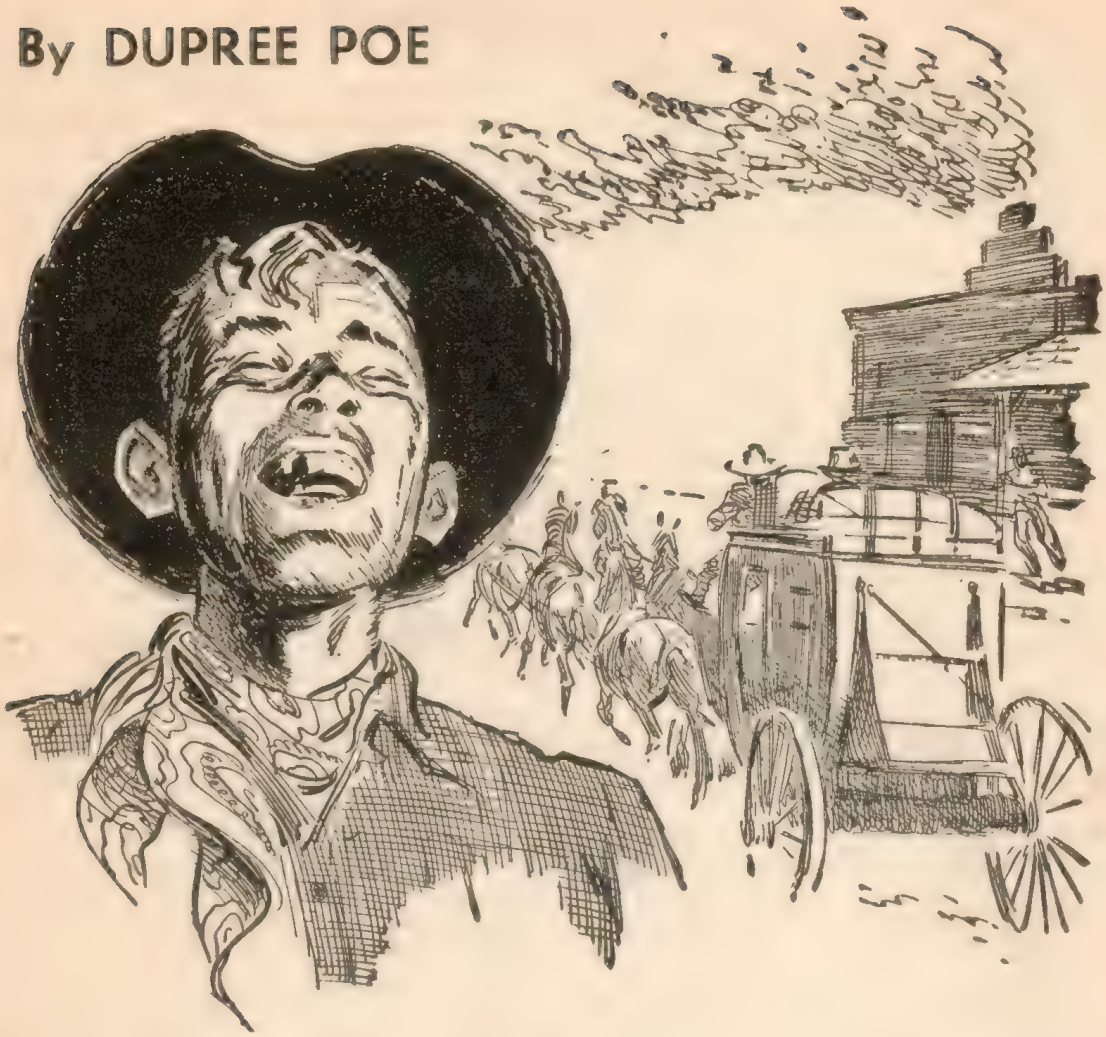
"I'm all through with guns, Lil," he said slowly. "I'm going to hang 'em on a peg in the Triangle S ranch house and raise me some cattle now. And after awhile—I'm goin' to take it slow this time, Lil—maybe I can come around a-courting you again, huh?"

"That sounds awful far away," Lil said softly. "I guess I kind of like your old way best, after all! You were mighty fast those days. Remember how it was, Dan?"

"I remember," Dan Kildore said, and he grinned broadly and there was no bitterness anywhere in the world. "Like this, you mean?"

With his good right arm he reached up and pulled her down to him, and all was at peace in Whiterock.

By DUPREE POE



She called him a bootlicker, but when death looked them all bang in the eye, he showed her he was plenty. . . .

BIG ENOUGH TO DIE

THE bright red Concord swayed and rocked on thorough-braces as it rolled to a stop behind six glossy blacks at the Red Bluff station.

Willie Dickson, just sixteen and new on the job, stood with two other stock-tenders and the stage-station master staring up at the driver who perched majestically in red and blue uniform on his throne atop the stage-coach. They totally disregarded the two men and the girl of fifteen who stepped from the Concord. A man like Jehu Garland, king of all drivers, came first,

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last and always with stagemen. Passengers didn't amount to much.

The six driving lines came down from atop the coach and a tender, catching them expertly, grinned his thanks to the driver.

"I'm hungry," the girl passenger complained. "Won't somebody get me something to eat?"

She turned hazel eyes on Willie, but he paid no attention to her at all. She should know better than to expect service until the driver's needs were satisfied. It was plain to see she hadn't traveled much on the Red Ball Stage Lines.

She stamped a foot indignantly. "Will somebody please pay attention to me!"

Nobody did.

With calm deliberation, Jehu Garland stripped off his gloves, flung them and his driving whip at Willie Dickson, favoring the boy with that much consideration. Goggle-eyed and trembling with admiration, Willie missed the catch. That whip with its silver-mounted stock and the hand-made gloves dropped on the ground. The station master and tenders gasped with dismay.

Now, I reckon I've sure done it! Willie told himself.

Red-faced and chagrinned, he stooped to retrieve the articles. He dusted them on a sleeve of his jacket and looked up at the driver whose baleful black eyes were filled with the fury of an exploding thunderbolt. The youngster reckoned it would be a mighty long time before Jehu Garland flung anything else his way.

Willie said nothing. He was scared to speak. No common stocktender ever spoke to a driver, unless addressed directly. That was an honor that seldom happened to anybody around a stage station. Maybe once in a lifetime.

JEHU GARLAND swore a blue streak, while the tenders trembled in their boots. He didn't even look directly at Willie Dickson. That was beneath his kingly dignity. Just to be sworn at by such a great man, Willie thought, would be an honor to make a kid stocktender mighty proud.

The driver directed his remarks toward Skunk Creek that wound and twisted along the stage road at the base of the mountain.

"By thunder, seems to me the Red Ball Stage Line has sure gone to hell! Hiring slick-chinned kids, right out of their diapers, for stocktenders, at a time when Injuns are raiding the stage line and scalping everything big enough to die in broad daylight. And with crooks trying their best to promote a danged railroad that'll sure put stage-coaching out of business! Looks to me like they'd hire men with enough plain horse sense and grown-up savvy to handle the job!"

If he had looked directly at Willie, that would have been a compliment. Coming as it did, it wasn't anything but a mighty good tongue-lashing. The station master looked mean enough to scalp a kid like him, too, but he wouldn't say a word in the presence of Jehu Garland. Later, Willie would catch the dickens, he reckoned.

Still talking to the creek, Jehu Garland climbed down from his perch and in his direct manner let it be known that he was thirsty. Willie might have held back and allowed some older fellow the privilege, but he lit out at race-horse speed for the wooden bucket and drinking gourd.

The girl blocked his way when he returned. Her dimples flashed and his heart skipped a beat. Willie stumbled over his own feet, lunged forward. Water splashed from the wooden bucket and almost hit Jehu Garland right in the middle of his pretty uniform. It struck the ground, splattering wet sand on the toes of the driver's shiny red boots. Then, to make things worse, that blamed girl

reached for the dipper and took herself a drink.

In a voice that sounded like a tinkling bell through forbidden silence that suddenly engulfed the stagemen, she said to Willie sweetly:

"Oh, thank you so much for the water. I was terribly thirsty."

The full force of her warm smile struck him, but it wasn't enough to thaw the chill that frosted his heart with stark panic.

Perhaps she hadn't been brung up proper, he reasoned.

"Haven't you got any politeness?" he asked sharply.

"Always, around a stage station, the driver comes first. Now, I'll catch it for what you've done. Looks like you sure made a mess of things for me!"

Sunlight brightened the pink ribbon in her brown hair. She tossed her head defiantly.

"Why on earth are station tenders such bootlickers?"

That reminded Willie of the sand on Jehu Garland's boots. He yanked out a clean bandanna handkerchief, dropped to his knees and began wiping those red boots clean. Maybe that might kind of soothe the indignation Jehu suffered.

The great man paid him no attention, whatsoever. If he had offered thanks, Willie might have dropped dead with fright and happiness. In his mind there was no goal greater than to become a stage-coach driver some day. That was the ambition of most stagemen, but a man had to work his way up to such a high position. It took a real man to drive a string of six and look down from a Concord at the lowly tenders who served him loyally.

"A bootlicker!" the girl repeated. "That's all you are! I don't see why Papa doesn't hire men for stocktenders, instead of kids! No wonder the railroad people are getting ready to crowd him out of business. There wouldn't be anybody around to defend the stage line if trouble came, anyhow!" Her hazel eyes snapped with indignation. "I suppose you know I'm Dorothy Lampers!" She said that in a cool, proud tone.

EXCLAMATIONS of amazement came from the stagemen. Willie came to his feet in a hurry, almost bowed double before the girl. Even old Jehu Garland cracked a grin and looked right friendly. He extended a bany hand.

"You ought to of told me you were Bob Lampers' daughter," he rumbled. "I've been working for Bob since we were driving stage on the Overland. Come here with him when he went into business for himself. Didn't know his daughter was such a fine young lady." He turned a frosty look on Willie and forgot to talk to the creek. "Dang your polecat soul, boy, do you realize you've been mighty uppity to the daughter of the gent who owns this stage line!"

"Yes, sir!" Willie choked. "I'm right sorry, sir."

He didn't know whether to drop dead with delight at having been spoken to directly by Jehu Garland, or just to stand there cringing before the girl with his hat in hand. She frowned at him.

"Stop squirming!" she ordered. "You're at least sixteen—and a nice boy, too. If you'd stop being a bootlicker!" Her eyes twinkled.

Willy saw the tall, shallow-cheeked passenger looking hard at the girl, with cold yellow eyes that narrowed with speculation. The tall man looked at the squat, plump passenger with the bulldog face and heavy jowls. Both men wore guns under their coat-tails. They swapped glances and moved off to one side, where they began talking in low tones.

"Who are them fellers?" Willie asked Dorothy. "They look to me like a couple of bobtailed rattlers ready to strike without warning."

The girl nodded solemnly. "They're bad ones," she said softly. "I'm afraid of those men. They're railroaders. They didn't know who I was, and I didn't talk to them when they asked

questions. They kept whispering about Indian raids and the stage line. Papa believes a new railroad through here would help the country, but he's turned down an offer to sell his company and take stock in the one that's being promoted. He doesn't believe the railroad company intends to build a line. He thinks the whole promotion is backed by the Blue Globe Stage Line that's forced to take the longer route across the state. They want this short route, and unless Papa makes his drivers come down to earth and start acting like common human beings, instead of kings, they're apt to take over the stage company and put us out of business."

She glared at Jehu Garland. "You," she accused, "and the rest of the drivers are just working for the company!"

"Good gosh!" Willie moaned. "A driver is the most important man on a stage line! More important even than the owner. Without good drivers, you wouldn't have not stage at all! It takes special talent to handle a six-horse team. I won't have you talking like that to Mr. Jehu Garland! I reckon, though, most any spoiled girl would talk like you do. You don't seem to know much, anyhow." He looked at her with pity, figuring she was mighty ignorant.

Jehu chuckled. For a moment, Willie thought the great man had favored him again with special notice, but he saw the driver gazing off abstractedly toward the creek below.

"Folks," the rotund station master announced, "grub is ready, if you want it."

Two stockholders remained outside to change the horses and prepare the Concord for another lap along the route. Everybody else went into the log cabin. It was bisected by a colored cloth curtain through the center, making the place into two small, earthen-floored rooms. The station master waved an arm toward a plain pine-topped table. Wooden benches were on each side of the table. Tin cups and plates, with a fork, spoon

[*Turn page*]

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and knife were at each place.

"Find yourself seats, and I'll dish up the grub," chuckled the station master. "We've got the usual fare—sow-belly, beans and bread. So help yourself, and if you don't like the grub, just help yourself to the mustard!"

His round face beamed with good nature when he served salt pork and beans to each of the diners, except to Jehu Garland and Dorothy Lampers. He gave them a slow, understanding wink.

"There's something special for special folks, always," he declared, pouring steaming hot coffee into tin cups for each diner.

WITHOUT a word, Willie dug into his grub, sensing that something mighty big was bound to explode. He heard those two male passengers snort with contempt for the plain grub on their plates. They didn't even touch the weak coffee that steamed in their cups. They just sat there, tense and mean, waiting to start a ruckus. Willie could tell they were bad ones.

The station master returned from the hearth with a covered skillet. He lifted the lid and exposed two plump, well-cooked mountain grouse dripping their own gravy. He gave Jehu Garland a mighty helping, as was right and proper respect to show a great driver. Then he dished out a bit of the grouse for Dorothy and turned to place the skillet back on the hearth.

Dorothy leaped to her feet suddenly, took the skillet from the station man's pudgy hands. She scooped out a helping on Willie's plate. He tried to speak up and tell her what a danged fool thing that was for her to do. A plain stockholder had no right to eat grub prepared for a driver and a special guest. Even the station master would get nothing but the leavings. He could eat that after the guests had departed and the food was cold.

"Just a minute sweetheart," said the pudgy man across from Dorothy. He was on his feet, his hands filled with leveled .44s. "Just slide that good grub over to me and Wade Sloan here. We sure like mountain grouse! I'm Blaze Young, the gent who busted that wooden-axle stage outfit over near Bearclaw Mountain last year, when they wouldn't give right-of-way and concessions to the new railroad company. I reckon all of you have heard about me."

Willie had heard, all right. Blaze Young had killed the stage owner and four of his drivers, had terrorized the line until the stocktenders quit. Then a new stage line had mysteriously come into being, monopolizing the traffic on the Bearclaw Mountain route.

Now the new railroad had been replanned and routed to compete with the Red Ball stage line. That looked mighty strange, and jibed with what Dorothy's father thought about the big Blue Globe Company intending to take over Red Ball's holdings by swapping old man Bob Lampers' railroad stock for his stage-line holdings. That new railroad stock would probably prove worthless.

Sloan stood up, lanky and grim. He grinned like a timber wolf. He was a seasoned gunslinger, well-known and mighty dangerous. Willie had seen the breed before, but never had first-hand experience with such a gent. The kid just sat there, nursing his steaming cup of coffee waiting.

"You folks don't want to get excited," said Sloan in a dry, flat tone. "Me'n my pard heard there's apt to be an Injun raid on this stage station. I reckon they picked this'n because it's such a lonesome spot on the route. Won't be no chance for any help to come." He looked at the girl. "We heard old Bob Lampers' daughter was riding the stage through to Helena. So we thought we'd come along and give her protection. Them Injuns are awful about stealing white women. We kind of reasoned that if they stole this'n and we got her back for her father, old Bob might swap his stage line for some gilt-edge railroad stock."

He reached for the skillet and calmly helped himself to mountain grouse. His short-coupled partner took some

for himself. Both gun-slingers resumed their seats, calm and deadly.

Old Jehu Garland squirmed uneasily. Forgetting all the courtesy a station tender should show a driver, Willie kicked the oldster sharply on the shin under the table. Jehu howled and his black eyes hardened. He looked straight at Willie and danged nigh busted.

He got to his feet, anyhow, like a blamed old fool. Lightning flamed his black eyes and his bearded face flushed angrily.

"You two hellions have planned a fake Injun raid on this station," he accused, "and you aim to kidnap this girl and force her dad to swap good stage-line holdings for bad railroad stock to get her back! Well, dang your ornery polecat hides, you'll do it over my dead carcass!"

Willie felt like choking Jehu.

OUT in the yard, he heard the other two tender finish changing the horses and servicing the Concord. They were out there without their guns, slick-hipped as a pair of fool eels, unaware of the threatening danger. Now Jehu Garland had kicked up a ruckus, without thought of consequences.

Willie was scared to reach for the gun on his own thigh. He saw Blaze Young watching him with narrowed eyes. Those two gunmen sat across the table from him, calmly eating, but they could get into action like streaks.

"Sit down, old man, and eat your grouse," ordered Wade Sloan coldly. "Me'n Blaze are trying to do Lampers and his daughter a mighty good turn —protecting her. We don't aim to let an old goat like you mess up our plans. If the Indians come, we'll take care of everything. Don't you worry."

The two stocktenders from outside walked right into that trap, unsuspecting. Old Jehu wasn't toting a gun. He sank wearily into his seat, just as the two stagemen entered.

They were bluff, hearty, hungry, and ready for their sow-belly and

[*Turn page*]

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beans. They didn't notice anything wrong immediately. They entered with a whoop and a holler and flung their hats across the room, faces beaming. Willie swapped a quick look with Dorothy. She stood up mighty well for a girl, he reckoned. She didn't look scared to death like most girls might have.

He jerked his head toward the skillet on the table and she reached for it. Then he leaped to his feet, catching Blaze Young and Wade Sloan with their eyes on the stagemen. Steaming hot coffee from his cup splashed into Blaze Young's flat face. The man sputtered with pain and indignation. He cut loose a roar of rage and dug for his guns, but he was blinded temporarily.

With the skillet, Dorothy slapped Wade loan on the side of the head. The lanky outlaw's guns came out, roaring. Willie upturned the table with a knee, shoving it into the laps of the owlhoots.

Two bullets hammered through the table top. Old Jehu Garland clutched his middle and buckled forward. He hit the floor, groaning like a man who was dying. A wild, furious mountain lion cut loose inside Willie when he heard those sounds coming from the man he fairly worshiped. His gun came from holster, hammering bullets through that tabletop.

Dorothy leaped over the table and went to work with the skillet. The station master swung a pot of boiling hot coffee over his head, splashed the contents over those two battered outlaws under the debris. And the two big stocktenders rushed forward to grab Wade Sloan and Blaze Young before they could recover.

Two of Willie's bullets had found a mark in Wade Sloan's right leg. He sprawled there groaning. Blood squirted out on the earthen floor. Willie reloaded and got down on his knees beside Jehu.

Under the circumstances, he figured it was all right for a common stocktender to speak directly to such a great man.

"You hurt bad, Mr. Garland?" he wanted to know. "You lie right still and I'll see how bad you're hit."

A roar of rage came from Jehu Garland. "I'm not hit a-tall!" he declared wrathfully. "But that cussed outlaw has done ruined the best silver belt buckle I ever owned!"

Willie sighed with relief when he saw the hand-engraved buckle bent and twisted by those bullets. He nodded gravely.

"It's a right nice buckle, but plumb spoiled now," he admitted. "Seems to me, though, it's lots better'n taking them bullets in the stummick. What you complaining about, Mr. Garland?"

"Why, dad-blast your impudent soul!" Jehu Garland came up on his hunkers and got slowly to his feet, remembering his dignity, and plumb outraged at having fallen so common. "You learn yourself some politeness, boy!"

"Yes sir!!" said Willie, thoroughly chastised and so dog-goned happy he could hardly speak. "I'm sure aiming to mend my manners, sir."

"Bootlicker!" snapped Dorothy tartly, tossing her head. She lifted the skillet and made a pass at Willie. He ducked the blow and she lit into him. "I was proud of you for a little while," she declared. "But now I'm ashamed of you for the way you're acting!"

"You don't understand much," Willie said lamely.

HE COCKED an ear and listened to a wild, blood-curdling whoop that came from down the trail. There was no mistaking what that sound signified.

"Injuns!" shouted Jehu Garland. "The pesky redskins are on us, boys!"

He wheeled over to the door for a look, so excited he forgot all about his dignity, and dropped three notches in the social scale in Willie's estimation when he spoke directly to a bunch of station men like that.

The kid walked over and stood beside Jehu. He took one look at the riders pounding up the slope. He spat disgustedly and turned to Dorothy.

"It ain't Injuns at all," he declared.

"It's just six gun-hung white renegades all painted and feathered like a band of braves. If this is that Indian raid them outlaws planned, there ain't much to it."

Dorothy's hazel eyes sparkled with delight. "Now that's the way I like for a man to talk!" she told him. "Where are the guns?"

That question froze blood in Willie's veins. He remembered now!

"We've got a new stock of brand-new Winchesters," the station master said, heading for the curtain that partitioned the cabin. "I'll fetch 'em."

All the life oozed out of Willie. Ever since he had come to work for the stage company, he had done everything wrong. Sometimes he forgot to feed the livestock or repair broken harness. Once, he forgot to dope the axles on a Concord, and the blamed thing got hot boxes and almost stalled before reaching the next swing station.

All of those small things made the station master furious. Now, here was something a whale of a lot bigger! Willie lowered his head and couldn't face the issue.

"No need you going into that other room," he said meekly. "I put that box of old rifles on the east-bound stage and plumb forgot to take that box of new Winchesters out of the boot. I reckon they won't be found until the stage gets to the next station."

The station master exploded a furious oath. He stood there clenching and unclenching his pudgy hands. Jehu Garland looked at Willie, then let his solemn stare rivet on the wall of the cabin. He had regained his dignity. He spoke to the wall, venting his wrath on a thing that couldn't answer back.

"Here we are with nothing but our empty hands and some forty-fives to fight a passel of highbinders dressed in feathers and painted fit to kill!!" he said, and swore. "If it wasn't so damned disgraceful, I'd choke the living daylights out of a dad-blamed fool boy for what he's done!"

The station master had no such dig-

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nity. He lashed out with the palm of a hand and knocked Willie sprawling.

"You plain idjit!" he snarled. "Now we haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell against them outlaws!"

Blaze Young sat up in his bonds and grinned evilly.

"Nobody'll get killed," he said softly, "if he'll do exactly what he's told. Anybody who wants to quit right now and stand aside can fork a horse and leave the country. Else everybody can stay here and get what's coming. Them boys out there won't be fooling none." He motioned to a stagetender, ordered, "Untie me!"

Down the slope the savage yells sounded, reverberating against the red rock bluff behind the cabin. One of the station tenders replied to the outlaw's proposition by stepping over to a wall peg for his '45s. He belted the guns around his middle and got ready to deal out some thundering trigger music of his own making. Jehu Garland reached for one of his weapons, having identical intentions of his own.

Everybody soon had guns, and Willie felt kind of proud of stagemen. Shucks, nothing could scare them.

"All right, let 'em come!!" said Jehu, easing over to the doorway. "Maybe we'll all die in this trap, but we'll do some killing, too!"

A rifle cracked outside, and that bullet hammered into the thick log wall. If shots didn't unload the cabin, that crew of sidewinders would close in and touch a torch to it, Willie reckoned. Those hellions were worse than Indians, because they were heartless white men.

"If I hadn't forgot about them new Winchesters," he told Dorothy, "we could maybe whip them in a hurry."

JEHU GARLAND'S .45 bellowed. A look of grim satisfaction flicked the oldster's bearded face. He was in his glory, ready to die in his boots. Willie had never seen such a noble fellow.

That shot from Jehu's gun might have touched off a mighty bloody war. But Willie stepped to the door and waved a white dish rag, the flag of peace. Dorothy gave him a withering look, and Jehu almost had a fit.

"They've set the house on fire!" Willie cried. "Smell that smoke? Wait, Mr. Garland! I know how to get 'em—all of 'em—alive!"

Old Jehu sniffed the unmistakable odor of smoke that came from outside the cabin. He snorted, glared at Willie.

"Some damn fool boys ought to learn not to wave no peace flag at a crew of blasted outlaws!" he thundered. "If you're a stageman, you'd ought to be big enough to die when it comes your time, boy!!"

"Mr. Garland, all we've got to do is stand Blaze Young in that doorway and make him tell them outlaws that all of us are captured," Willie pleaded.

A slow, hard grin spread over the stage driver's bearded face. He yanked Blaze Young to his feet, removed his bonds. Then he buckled a belt around that outlaw's middle and shoved an unloaded gun into the holster.

"They'll kill me if I do it!" Blaze cried wildly.

Jehu prodded him to the doorway with a gun muzzle in his back. "I'll kill you if you don't," he declared. "So you'd better start talking."

It looked natural enough with Blaze Young standing there in the doorway waving the white dish rag Willie handed him.

"Hey, you fools, you trying to kill me and Wade!" Blaze cried wildly.

"Tell 'em to come on to the cabin and have a bite to eat," Jehu Garland ordered, jamming the gun into the outlaw's back. "Go ahead, tell 'em!"

Blaze told them. He stood there, trembling like a man with the ague, but he told them and made it convincing.

Willie almost shouted with happiness when he saw those hellions come boldly from concealment. Painted like savages, they moved forward with full confidence, trusting the man who still stood in the doorway.

They were right in front of the cabin when they realized they had been tricked. Their hands streaked

for gun butts, but it was too late now. For they saw guns bristling in the hands of determined stagemen who piled out of the cabin.

Caught by surprise, the outlaws knew they faced sudden and certain death if they resisted. Slowly they lifted their hands, surrendering in a group. It didn't take long to hogtie that bunch of pseudo-warriors and load them into the big Concord waiting in the yard.

Jehu Garland climbed up into the driver's seat. He motioned for Willie to get up there beside him. The kid was dumfounded, but he obeyed the great man. Jehu handed him the six driving ribbons, chuckled.

"You'rea driving her this trip, sonny," he said. "I knowed your dad when we worked together on the Overland. He was the best whip Ben Holliday ever hired. You'll make a danged good driver, too. You've got it in you."

For a moment, Willie was speechless. His surprise and elation overflowed. Here was the crowning cli-

[*Turn page*]

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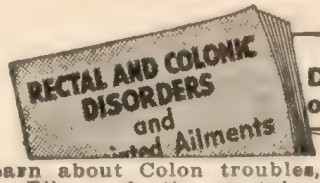

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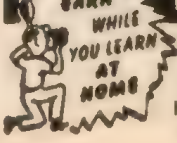

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max of his highest ambitions, he reckoned. He was a stage-coach driver now!

"Why, good gosh, Mr. Garland!"

"Drive her, sonny. You've got the whip now." Jehu smiled.

Dorothy looked up at Willie from the ground. The station master and stocktenders stood there. Not a one of them dared address a driver directly, unless spoken to first.

Willie stiffened with all the dignity he could muster. He looked down at those lowly creatures from his lofty throne. He knew what it was to be so dog-goned low, himself, he reckoned. The girl lowered her glance as though she envied him. Well, she sure had a right to!!

Willie let his gaze freeze on the creek below the station cabin. In true stage-coach driver tone, he spoke to that swirling water.

"There's a fool girl could hop up here and ride beside me," he said, "if she wasn't scared of maybe catching something."

Dorothy squealed the way a fool girl will when she's mighty pleased, and Willie grinned at her. ● ● ●

ONE NIGHT AT SADIE HOGAN'S

(Continued from page 8)

knew that some day one of them would have to go.

Durk met Steele's eyes, and for a long moment they stared at each other, then Steele turned as the Mexican string band began to play a lively tune. A girl in a green dress came from the rear of the barroom and smiled at the crowd. Then she began to move in time to the music, whirling about the room in a gay dance of the Border land.

Durk Pastor forgot about the note he had received; he forgot about everything except this slender, dark-eyed girl named Lorna Kane. She affected him as no other woman ever had. She was beautiful, and that slow smile of hers drove him wild.

Sadie Hogan moved up beside Durk, but he did not take his eyes from the dancer.

"I've seen you watching her before, Durk," Sadie said. "You like her, don't you?"

He nodded and motioned his lips. "She's too good to be working in this dive of yours."

Sadie's fleshy face turned gloomy. "You're always running my place down, Durk, always giving me the cold shoulder. I don't see why you can't be a little nicer to me. I like you, Durk, and—and I've always wanted to know you better. This place makes a lot of money. We could have some high times together."

A scowl soured his face, and he said irritably, "Why don't you beat it?"

Sadie stared absently at the big ruby ring on her left hand. There was a hurt look on her face. "I'm sorry, Durk," she said. "I didn't mean to get you upset."

SHE moved heavily across the room and Durk did not even glance in her direction. He had eyes only for Lorna Kane and watching her, he told himself the girl would fit in nicely at the big log house of his. He had been thinking about it ever since Lorna Kane's arrival here three days ago.

The girl circled the cleared space in the center of the room. She came close to Durk's table and pirouetted before him. She gazed at him steadily, showing her white teeth in that tantalizing smile.

Durk felt the hot blood surging into his cheeks, pounding in his throat. He was aware that his hands were pressed hard against the edge of the table. Then she moved on, and Durk

Pastor knew disappointment.

He watched her as she spun along the bar and he cursed when a cowhand made a playful pass at her. Then she stopped again, this time in front of Bart Steele, and she was giving the big man a provocative smile, as though, Durk thought, she were dancing especially for him.

Durk Pastor half arose from his chair before he caught himself. He sat down slowly, his insides cold. He put his hand around the whisky glass and gripped it hard.

Then the dance ended. The music stopped and the girl ducked quickly through the crowd and was gone.

A little sigh went past Durk's lips, and he reached for his tobacco sack. His fingers touched the piece of paper in his shirt pocket. He had forgotten about it while the girl danced. Now his eyes moved once more to the slatted doors, and he wondered what this gent who had sent him the note would look like.

Probably some fuzzy-faced kid who

[*Turn page*]

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wasn't dry behind the ears, who didn't know the first thing about handling a gun. Durk would kill him, and that would be the end of it. Durk's neighbors would fear him even more, and Bart Steele, since he had never witnessed Durk's draw, would get a chance to see how fast his enemy was.

The big clock back of the bar struck eleven. Impatience began to gnaw at Durk. What was this Tommy Banks waiting for? Why didn't he come and get it over with?

Durk had the impression that everybody in the room was watching him. He saw old Limpy Smith at the bar, talking with Sadie Hogan. Big, fat Sadie, who was trying mighty hard to get herself a man. Durk wondered, briefly, if he had missed a bet by not playing up to the old gal.

He glanced once more at the door, then sat up straight in his chair when he saw Lorna Kane come back into room. The girl looked his way, and he thought there was an invitation in her dark eyes. He felt a little dizzy as he got up and started across the room toward her.

A man at a card table said, "It's almost midnight, Durk. Think he's coming?"

Pastor did not answer did not even glance at the man, for he had the girl on his mind, and she was still looking at him and smiling.

As he reached the end of the bar, she began moving along it toward him. She passed Bart Steele and put her eyes on the big man briefly. Steele stepped out from the bar and laid a hand on her bare arm. The girl drew away, and Durk felt the hot blood begin to pound through his veins. He moved faster until he stopped beside Steele.

"Don't touch her again, Bart!"

Steele turned slowly and faced him. The big man's eyes were very bright. "And if I do?"

"Then I'll have to kill you, Bart."

IT WAS deadly still in the room now, and the crowd was like so many statues, watching and, Durk thought, hoping.

Steele took one step away from the girl. If there was emotion in him, it did not show on his face.

"It might as well be now as later, Pastor," he said. "Let's see how much you've got on the ball."

They were both moving then, their hands whipping down. Two shots sounded as one, and two bullets burned through flesh and bone. Steele twisted around and looked at the girl called Lorna Kane. His lips moved, but no words came. He sank to the floor, and Durk watched him through eyes that were dimming fast.

Steele was dead, and Durk knew that in a minute he would be dead, too. He put one hand on the bar to steady himself and, through the haze, he saw Lorna Kane's face. He remembered the smile and wondered why it was no longer on her red lips. Then Durk Pastor was down on the floor, and the breath had gone out of him.

Sadie Hogan came forward and knelt beside Durk Pastor. After a moment, the fat woman rose slowly and faced Lorna Kane. There was bitterness in Sadie's eyes.

"You did it on purpose," she said. "You made them kill each other. I know, because I've been watching you."

There was a deep sorrow in the dancing girl's eyes. "They were both bad," she said. "Durk Pastor killed a harmless old man to get the money to buy his place here. He thought he was safe, and no one would ever find out. He didn't know that John Banks' kid was in the express office that night."

Limpy Smith stared at the girl queerly.

"It must have been you that put that note on my door," he said.

The girl nodded. She said, as if she were talking to herself, "I've been a long time finding him. I changed my name and kept going from one town to another. I couldn't use a gun on him, but I saw that he paid."

Limpy Smith swallowed hard. He said, "Then—then you're—"

She nodded again. "Yes, I'm Tommy Banks." ● ● ●

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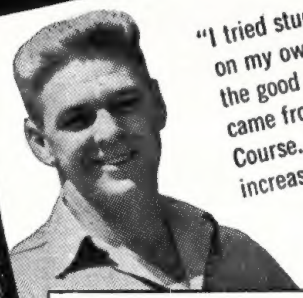

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